

Worship: A Gospel Compass

Recovering the Ancient Dance

I. OUR CULTURAL CONTEXT

Let's play a little "word association" game. When you hear the word "Dance", what do you think of? Dancing brings to mind images of men and women paired up giving bodily expression to the sounds of music. When we find the word "dance" in the Bible, however, different images come to mind (READ Psalm 30:11—why?; 149:3—when and how?; Ecclesiastes 3:4—a time, what time?; Jeremiah 31:13—new covenant promise; Luke 15:25—celebrating lost son's salvation) The Gospel brings us back into a right relation with our creator God and initiates a redemptive dialogue and liturgical movement in worship. I call that the "ancient dance" and we want to recover that.

Now when I say the word "worship", what word comes to your mind—reverence, awe, praise, thanks, joy, fear? How about the word "durable"? Do you associate worship with that which lasts? In Roald Dahl's "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory", the test that Willie Wonka put the children through to access their loyalty was the temptation to sell the secret of the "Everlasting Gobstopper"—the candy that never wore out.

John Piper has said, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever."

Worship on the Lord's Day is the way we cultivate the vision that keeps us alive—the vision of the glory of God. The Sabbath is a "little eternity"—a few hours in the freedom from the present temporal kingdom of necessity to the coming eternal kingdom. It is the same in the Lord's Day, which likewise points to the goal to which all of history is moving—the great rest of God. The change from the seventh day to the first day acknowledges the beginning of the outworking of the rest of God—the new creation. This is what the Puritans called "market day for the soul."

Ireneaus said, "The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of the glory of God". This is true of churches as well. We must come alive to worship and by means of worship. God loves for us to worship Him. Worship was made for us and we were made for worship. God will be no better off because of our worship, but we will be!

There is a movement within the church today which makes much of those who are referred to as "seekers". There is much that commends our consideration of the contemporary culture, but it is also prudent to assess the object and aim of our seeking. What is it that is being sought? What do we love and long for? Is it the presence of God? Is it the peace, prosperity, and pleasure that accompany the presence of God. We must ask, "Are we seekers, tourists or pilgrims?"

The challenge of every generation of Christians is to examine the world in which it lives and ask, "how is the gospel to be lived out in this cultural moment?" These are days of decline, in which both the culture and the Church are unraveling and being reshaped.

While we are always ready to acknowledge the power of God to reverse trends in the lives of individuals and societies, we must also acknowledge that the unfolding of God's providence represents the intersection of the human and divine.

Trends are reversed by God, in His providence, through means. It does not appear in history that God has been pleased to transform cultures by the simple wave of his hand. He uses people, like the sons of Issachar, *"who understood the times with knowledge of what Israel should do"* (1 Chronicles 12:32).

Worship is something which should be taken seriously in its own right and which should be viewed in light of this cultural moment. It would be a mistake simply to import something from the past or make adjustments in light of the present without serious reflection upon what worship is and what it means for people who live today.

Worship is a distinctly counter-cultural activity. In fact, it is difficult to think of anything in the life of the Church which is more so. a) Attempts to strip worship in order to make it accessible to the uninitiated will be, in the short term, self-defeating. b) A failure to learn from the past and benefit from forms that have served centuries of Christians will leave us malnourished. c) Insensitivity to the environment in which we live will leave unnecessary obstacles in the paths of those whom we desire to serve, that is, God's elect, those whom He is gathering to Himself.

Just a brief reflection on these three observations should be sufficient to reveal the huge task of developing a philosophy of worship. This is worth doing because the Lord and our times require it. What follows is an attempt to discuss the meaning of worship, a particular form of worship, the church year, the place of symbols in worship, and the proper union of Word and Sacrament. Are there any questions so far?

II. OUR DEFINITION OF WORSHIP

Some of you might remember the late 50's group called "the Teddy bears", with lead singer, Phil Spector. They wrote and performed a song that more of you will remember, "To Know Him Is to Love Him". It went like this: "To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him and I do, yes I do, and I do". That is the way it is in our relationship with God. To know him is to love him and to love him is to know him—yes, and I do!

But you can not love a God whom you do not know and you will only love Him to the degree that you know him. So the life of worship is bent upon increasing our knowledge of God in order that we may more fully love and delight ourselves in Him. So in this matter of worship, we must acknowledge the primacy of the mind, while maintaining the ultimacy of the heart.

Because the highest thing in life is to know God (John 17:3) and because the knowledge of God must necessarily lead to delight in God, the highest activity in which a human being can be engaged is the activity of worship. Worship is both an individual and a corporate activity. Knowing, loving and delighting in God finds expression in the devotional life of the believer. In our devotional life we pursue God because He is supremely lovely and worthy of pursuing and it is that pursuit which is delightful to the soul.

The believer's private devotional life fans the flames of affection for God, which in turn prepares the individual for corporate worship. In corporate worship God gathers His people out of the world and to the heavenly Sinai (Heb. 12:22ff). He then comes to dwell in their midst in all of His heavenly splendor and glory. His people rise up and enter into His presence, their true homeland, to sing His praises, offer their prayers, hear from their covenant Lord, offer their lives and observe the sacraments.

Worship can be defined in a number of ways. The word finds its origin in the old English language. The term "worth-ship" describes our ascribing to God the worthiness he deserves. Worship is a meeting of God with His beloved people. It is not a natural, but a supernatural event. Again, it is the most counter-cultural experience of our lives because it is an intrusion of the heavenly glory into the present worldly order. It is also a leaving of the present worldly order and a going up into heaven.

Our worship therefore should emphasize this relational dimension. If eternal life is knowing God (John 17:3), then we believe worship to be the expression of reverence, praise, adoration, thanksgiving and honor which are the natural fruit of tasting and seeing that God is supremely good. Corporate worship is a meeting between God and His people in the context of security, love and intimacy. Corporate worship is central to the life of the church. Everything either leads to or flows from worship.

While this is a good place to start, by itself this definition is too narrow. In reading through the narrative of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, the pivotal event is the gathering of the people at Mt. Sinai. It is there that God enters into covenant with the nation. Everything leads to and flows from that central event.

This redemption from Egyptian bondage was for the specific purpose that, *"they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness"* (Exodus 5:1). The covenant was established in order that the nation Israel might be a light among the nations. The paradigm for our worship is the exodus experience. We don't gather on Sunday mornings to make yet another covenant, but rather to celebrate the reality that we have been gathered to God through the blood of the everlasting covenant shed on the cross in the work of Christ. The Gospel is a recapitulation of the Exodus.

The imagery is appropriate. God summons us to Himself. Each week we come out of the world and to the Lord. We come as it were to "Mt. Sinai" in order to meet with Him. (Ex. 19; Heb. 12:18-24) He descends from the heavens with all of His angelic host attending Him. He comes in great power and glory to us just as He did to them. Then it was seen, but now it is not.

The fact that this is what happens in worship is underscored by practices which we have experienced. It is likely we have all heard opening prayers of one kind or another which can generally be called invocations. An invocation calls on someone's presence. In worship it is the presence of the God of heaven and earth, that we desire and invoke, and He comes!

A more comprehensive definition of worship is needed. Worship is not just a piece of theater for us. Nor is it simply an activity in which God is an audience. God is a participant just as He was at Mt. Sinai. Hence, worship is not a performance, but a meeting between God and His people. We have our purposes in that meeting and He has His own. When we come together as the people of God we come believing that He is already there. We come expecting that He will hear our request and dwell in the midst of His people *"inhabiting their praises"*.

Worship is dynamic. It is a dialogue. Our part is to praise, give thanks, sing, pray, adore, revere, and delight in God. God's part is to dwell in our midst, to minister His grace—comforting, encouraging, convicting, and revealing Himself, to speak through His Word read and preached, to nourish their souls in the Sacraments, and delight in them as the object of His affection.

There is an appropriate sense of anticipation which should accompany our worship. Worship is not passive, but involves work. On the one hand, worship involves God coming down to meet with us. On the other hand, worship involves us, His people, going up to the heavenly Sinai to unite our voices with the assembled saints of all ages gathered to exult in the lover of our souls. If those images do

not stir up in us a sense of wondrous expectation there is something amiss. It is this glory of worship which I believe the Church needs to recover and develop more fully.

Furthermore, worship is the most powerful apologetic and evangelism we have. It certainly seemed to be that for the apostle Paul. In admonishing the Corinthians concerning their worship and the proper exercise of gifts, he says, that an unbeliever in the midst of their assembly would be so affected by the presence of God among them that, *"the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you."* (1 Cor. 14:25).

Worship was meant to be both the goal of and means to evangelism. Israel was to be a servant to the nation that they might know and worship the one true God (Is. 2:2-4; 56:6-8). The Psalms also make this truth abundantly clear (Ps. 67:1-7; 47:1; 100:1-5; 102:18; 105:1-2). We see that worship is the end to which redemption points (1 Pet. 2:9). Jesus himself sings to the praise of God (Heb. 2:12). Even God sings in delight of his people (Zeph. 3:17).

I am convinced that the Church and the culture need the same thing: true worship—worship where God is present in power—moving, convicting, thrilling, breaking, rebuilding, revealing, comforting, etc. It has been argued that we have not forgotten or discarded God, but we have made Him weightless. The Hebrew word for glory means weighty. It is the glory which must be restored to the Church and her worship. Our prayer must be that the glory of God would come down and rest upon the Church.

III. OUR FORM IN WORSHIP

There are several issues or questions that need to be addressed regarding the particular form of worship being suggested here. Included among these matters are such things as: a) What does God require in worship?; b) What is liturgy?; c) What about the Church year?

The only place to find answers to the first question is in the Scriptures. What we find there is normative for Christ's Church. A pattern and general guidelines for worship can be determined by looking at the whole of the Bible. General principles may be deduced from that pattern and guidelines. Their application in a local situation will vary dependent upon differences in culture, time, preference, etc. I refer to our form of worship as a "common sense" liturgy.

This distinction between general principles and the freedom given in application is recognized in the Westminster Confession of Faith: *". . . there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word which are always to be observed."* (WCF 1:6). We have freedom to regulate our worship so long as the general guidelines for worship are not violated.

Other church resources such as the Book of Church Order of the PCA, and its Directory for Worship, identify those elements of biblical worship which are to be present in our services (Chapter 47:9). They include reading Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, prayer, preaching, presenting offerings, confessing the faith, and observing the Sacraments. The exact ordering of these elements is not stipulated, that being the responsibility of the church leaders.

It is important to recognize that elements and forms are not the only considerations for the meaningful worship of God. The hearts of the people are of primary importance. But there is an interplay between the heart and the form.

Form does shape positively or negatively how we think about worship and our experience of it. Liturgy is a form which enables God's people to give expression to what is in their hearts. Any true believer wants to worship. All true believers need helps and liturgy is that help.

There is a need for corporate forms in an age of individualism and broken families. Liturgy connects this generation of believers to the rich traditions shaped by previous generations. It has the benefit of facilitating an awareness of the transcendent majesty of God. Because historic liturgy is a recapitulation of the gospel it expresses the radical immanence of a loving Redeemer as well. The particular type of liturgy described here may be new to this generation, but it has served the Church for years.

All worship services have a liturgy or some form of order. Even the most spontaneous services, if observed over a period of time, will manifest a form. That is obviously true of more clearly liturgical services such as what will be presented here. Whether in a formal or informal service, the elements of the service are there to assist people in their worship.

Liturgy derives from a Greek word which means 'people work.' Singing, praying, reading, listening, preaching, and confessing are the 'works' which we do in worship. The question becomes a qualitative one: What form best facilitates worship? While there is room for diversity in answering that question, I am convinced that a recovery of the ancient worship form of the Western church is greatly needed.

There are several reasons for my conviction about liturgy. First, this liturgy is theo-centric. It is cognizant of the living God from the very beginning to the very end. This focus upon the presence of God emphasizes His transcendence, which produces a holy awe of God; and His immanence, which strengthens those upon whom He has set His affection by the reality of His presence among them. God continually delights in inhabiting the praises of His people, of visiting them as the Bishop of their souls, and in moving powerfully among them by His Spirit.

Second, the progression of the liturgy is one which recapitulates the pattern reflected in the Exodus and thus is a dramatic restatement of the Gospel. In its full form liturgy moves from a call to worship, to the invocation of the presence of God, to the confession of sin, the assurance of pardon based on the finished work of Christ, to the reading and preaching of the Word of God, to the response of the people in their prayers, to the celebration of the covenant meal marked by great joy and gladness in our salvation, to the sending of the people into the world for service, all liberally integrated with songs and hymns and responses of one kind or other.

Third, history has value. The various pieces of the worship service each week are taken from ancient creeds, liturgies and devotions preserved over the centuries. They serve to connect us to our past. We are not the first generation of Christians ever to have lived. There are myriads who have gone before us and faced the struggles of life while maintaining a degree of obedience to the Father which is hard to find in our day. We need them and their spirituality. This is one small way to make that connection. *"We believe in the communion of saints."* (Apostles Creed)

Fourth, I believe that this worship is consistent with the commitment we have made to our covenant children. As we want to be aware of our great heritage and past, so also we want our children to know that past. We are anxious for our children to stand on the shoulders of their faithful brothers and sisters, viewing the glory of God, the wonder of His work in Jesus Christ and the hope which the Holy Spirit presses into our hearts with the same reverence, awe and affection reflected in their prayers, confessions and hymns. As we evangelize, we must equip.

Fifth, this form reinforces that idea that we are a pilgrim people. Worship is the most counter-cultural activity in which we can be engaged. This is something that must be understood deeply and bears repeating in sermons and conversations. When we cross the threshold at the rear of the sanctuary we are crossing over into a different world. That world is the world of heaven and the glory of God and the marriage feast of the Lamb. If an unbeliever is in the midst of that he cannot help but feel uncomfortable. Indeed, it is unfamiliar to us! Nevertheless, for us it is home. We leave that world only reluctantly in order to serve God as pilgrims in this world.

Finally, I believe that this kind of worship restores a much needed emphasis on the majesty and glory of God. Our culture tends to trivialize everything. God is supremely great and worthy of reverence and cultivating that proper reverence should be a goal. It is a marvelous paradox of the Christian faith that as our awareness of the greatness of God is heightened, the greater is our experience of His tenderness.

That is the staggering thing about being a Christian. God, whose majesty and glory exceed our comprehension, has made us His children and takes great delight in us as any father would His own children. We ought to enjoy worship as the meeting between God and those whom He loves.

IV. THE PATTERN OF THE CHURCH YEAR

The church year reinforces the idea that worship is an activity rooted in what it means for us to be a pilgrim and covenant people who are aliens and strangers in a foreign land. The ancient Israelites marked time differently from the surrounding culture. While their "church year" followed the cycles of seed time, first fruits, and full harvest, God infused those seasons with rich new meaning by making them redemptive in character and by using them to teach His people.

Springtime was the Passover celebration, Pentecost was the season of the initial harvest, and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) was the celebration of the final ingathering (Leviticus 23:1-22). The Hebrew calendar was a re-enactment of the redemptive work of God from deliverance through consummation. The church year, like the Hebrew calendar, serves a similar purpose.

The church year is a plausibility structure to make our convictions more fully expressed in the totality of life. It is intended to reinforce Christian values as it focuses on God's redemptive acts in history fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. Advent celebrates His coming in fulfillment of the promise, the Christmas season His incarnation and Epiphany His role as Savior of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

The intervening ordinary time until Lent focuses upon His life in obedience to the Father. Lent prepares us for the completion of His work. Holy Week takes us through the cycle from repentance to great joy in the celebration of the Lord's victory over sin and death. Ascension focuses upon Christ's reign. Pentecost focuses upon the gift of the Spirit for the empowering of the church and the living of the Christian life.

It is my desire that our church and future generations understand and mark time differently; to live in a way that is different from the surrounding culture. Liturgy and the church year assist us in doing that. They have served the church well for centuries. Structures like the church year, as with our own convictions, must be continually reformed lest they become hard, obscure, and lifeless traditions. We all recognize that any form can lead to formalism. I would suggest, however, that in our day evangelicals need much more form than they have. We suffer not from a dead formalism, but from a kind of ecclesiastical drift and liturgical anarchy. We are not the better for it.

V. THE USE OF SYMBOLS IN WORSHIP

Symbols have always been a part of the life of God's people. Piles of rocks in Israel, altars, trees, rivers, etc. have been used to focus upon the character of God or to serve as reminders of the great redemptive acts of the Lord. We are people with senses. We see, hear, taste, smell, and touch the world around us. Worship should engage all the senses. Again, we want to be careful and take appropriate steps in creating symbols and in using time-honored symbols, but their proper use will serve God's people well to enhance their worship.

There are many illustrations of the use of symbols in worship. Celtic Crosses served as pictographs telling the redemptive stories of the Bible to the illiterate masses. Hand-carved lecterns from European churches communicate similarly. As the congregation viewed the reader, they would see the Bible resting on the outstretched wings of an eagle—the natural enemy of the viper. That visual imagery communicates that the Word of God destroys the works of the Devil.

Even congregational posture and movement are powerful symbols in worship. When congregations kneel in prayer, they express bodily the humility and dependence that is appropriate in prayer. The choral procession forward symbolizes the whole congregation going up to meet with God. When freshly baptized infants are carried into the midst of the congregation, their inclusion in the covenant community is visualized. When families come forward to receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the multi-generational nature of the Church is displayed.

The colors of the church year serve as another example of the use of symbols in worship. Blue signifies the preparatory nature of Advent season as well as the royalty of Christ. White expresses the celebrative nature of the season at Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter. Red is used as the color of the blood of Christ and the martyrs. It also symbolizes the fire and coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Green represents the ongoing work of God and growth in the church. Such symbols reinforce the drama of our worship and leave impressions upon the mind and soul.

VI. THE UNION OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

Worship is to include the sacraments as a means of grace for the people of God. If God appoints something for us that by it we might grow in our knowledge of Him and His grace, then we ought to employ it. If God appoints something for us that by it we might cultivate health in our souls, then we would be wise to take advantage of it at every possible opportunity. A more frequent practice of Lord's supper is perhaps a first step to recovering the means of God's grace.

Preaching is also a means of grace and it is right that we should have a high regard for it. It is the Word of God which regulates all of life and stands above us and all our activity. We submit ourselves to its teaching and seek to practice in thought, desire and act, all that it commands. That is our tradition as Protestants and particularly as those who are heirs of the English Puritans. I am convinced that our day is in desperate need of a restoration of true preaching that is both exegetical and theological in its application of the gospel.

The Westminster Larger Catechism, question #155, stresses the importance of preaching.

Question: How is the Word made effectual to salvation?

Answer: The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them to Christ; of conforming them to His image, and subduing them to His will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

There is a famine in the land for the hearing of the Word of God and the people are malnourished as a result. The kind of preaching which is needed begins with the text but doesn't stay with that text. Preaching should show that there is a connectedness in one text or sermon with the whole counsel of God. Preaching should exalt God and display His grace in such a way that the soul is enticed to seek Christ and His sufficiency.

Believing that the Word of God preached is central to worship is not to say that it is all that there is to worship. While preaching is the glue which holds life together, it is not all of life. It is also necessary to restore the sacraments and other important elements of worship to a more prominent place, not in terms of order but in terms of practice.

If John Calvin had his way and if we were to have visited one of his services at Geneva, we may very well have felt uncomfortable with some of the elements there. Calvin desired to observe the sacrament of the Lord's Supper at least weekly (Institutes, 4:17'44ff). He deferred to the wishes of his consistory who objected. He also felt that the confession of sin should properly be followed by a declaration of absolution or as we say an assurance of pardon. ". . . *it is no mean or trivial thing to have Christ's ambassador present, furnished with the mandate of reconciliation.*" (Institutes, 3:4:12ff). Again, because of the objections of the people, Calvin yielded.

This reference to Calvin's convictions simply makes the point that our older tradition retained much more than has been eclipsed in our time. That first generation of reformers did not go as far as we have. It is my conviction that we have thrown much of the baby out with the bath water. The church needs to recover an ancient worship form while retaining the centrality of the Word of God as the defining element for all of life. In doing so, we are seeking something which was in the mind of Calvin and other Reformers and which can have great power in our day.