

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Public Worship

I. THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

L. P. JACKS said that the attempt to define education, though always doomed to end in failure, is a profitable intellectual exercise. I think we may adapt that and say that the attempt to define worship, though equally foredoomed to failure, is a rewarding spiritual exercise. Most preachers engage in it from time to time and urge their congregations to reflect upon what is implied in the meaning of this word "worship." But, in any sense which isn't rather trivial, worship is as difficult to define as are love or life. And for the same reason. What the existentialist philosopher says of life is no less true of worship: "It is not a problem to be solved; it is an experience to be lived through." If, however, we are going to make worship a subject of reflection or discussion, we must find some categories in which to think and talk about it. And, of course, for Christian men the place to find them is the Scripture.

There are two Biblical conceptions with which I think we must work when we are theologizing about worship; one is the Word and the other is the Spirit. We will consider them in turn.

THE WORD

Since the Reformation, the Word has been the dominant factor in Protestant thought about worship. On the one hand, the presence of God is conceived of, not in terms of a substance whereof we partake, but in terms of revealed Mind and Will to which we give attention. On the other hand, the sacrificial element in worship is conceived of, not as the offering of propitiation through the Mass, but as the self-offering of the worshipping Church in an act expressive of trust in the God who has revealed Himself. On this view, worship is personal encounter. It is God speaking and man heeding. It is I-Thou. In terms of the familiar analysis of this I-Thou made by personalist theologians, worship is the Word being spoken as claim and succour and the Word being heeded in the faith which is obedience to the claim and commitment to the succour.

The Word is the vehicle of the Truth of God. As such, it is objective in the absolute sense. But, so to speak, the vehicle has a destination. The function of a word is to communicate; and communication is a two-term conception. It implies relation. It is

from-to. The Word, then, is *from* God, revealing His Mind and Will, and it is *to* minds that are set to know Him and wills that are set to obey Him. On this conception of worship, the worshipper is caught up into the essence of the thing. What happens is not external to, nor independent of, him; it is not a drama he observes, nor a transubstantiation before which he bows in mystery and awe. Something happens, right enough; something which is, in one sense, objective and wholly other—God speaks. But the point of speaking is to be heard. Communication is the *raison d'être* of the Word. And, as we have said, communication is two-term; it implies hearer as well as speaker. And so the objective, wholly other, element in worship, though it needs to be insisted upon with all the force at our command, cannot be conceived of as something apart altogether from the worshipper. He is involved in the very essence of the thing, when we think of worship in terms of the Word.

Now, it is just here that one of the besetting sins of worshippers in the Reformed tradition, and particularly Free Church worshippers as we know them, finds its occasion. Their sin is subjectivism. I am thinking of prayers devoted to the analysis or contemplation of the worshipper's feelings, rather than to extolling the glory of God or claiming the objective realities of salvation. I am thinking also of hymns—and of the lush and sentimental tunes to which they are sometimes set—whose chief design seems to be the inducement of an emotion, a feeling warm and comfortable, or bold and excited, according to your taste. I should find it very difficult, of course, to argue that this kind of thing has not been a means of grace to some. Indeed it has; and that is not surprising. If the Almighty can make the wrath of men to praise Him, He can presumably do the same thing with their self-preoccupation and their sentimentality. But we should not continue in sin that grace may abound. The kind of worship which is taken up with the worshipper's own self-consciousness, which consists in taking your own moral temperature or feeling of your own spiritual pulse—that is the shame of the Reformed tradition. It is, in the realm of worship, that corruption of the best which is the worst.

This is not, of course, to suggest that emotion has no place in worship. It is, no doubt, useful to have a word 'emotion' and to think of it as applying to a mode of consciousness distinct from others called "thought" and "will." This way of talking provides us with three useful pegs on which to hang things when we are reflecting on human activity. But it is only a way of talking. The idea that emotion is something which you can either put into, or leave out of, human activity is quite mistaken. All human activity is emotional. Even mathematicians say that mathematical activity, at its highest levels, is attended by a most sublime emotion, though many of us perhaps find this hard to believe! There is not only a knowing of the Truth; there is a feeling of it and a doing of it

also. These are not separable in first-order, but only in second-order, activity, when we are not so much doing something as reflecting upon having done it. And so, of course, one is not, and cannot be, against emotion in worship.

What one is against is the view that worship is a sort of S.T. (the counterpart of P.T.), intended to improve the spiritual appearance or quicken the spiritual metabolism of the worshipper. There may be activities which can be thought of as spiritual gymnastics and for which some sort of case can be made out on psychological grounds; but, whatever these are, they are not worship.

I even find some difficulty in the notion, often put forward, that worship is essentially a response of gratitude. It is a little hard to be clear what this word 'gratitude,' as we normally use it, implies; but, if it is taken to mean a feeling which we experience, then, of course, we cannot tell a man that he ought to respond with gratitude. What sense does it make to tell him he ought to feel what he does not feel? "Ought" implies "can" and, while we can have duties to do, we can scarcely have duties to feel. But does it make poor sense to tell a man that he has a duty to worship God? Certainly not to Christians. If, however, they tell him this, they cannot be speaking simply of his duty to feel something, but to do something: what they are telling him is that he ought to attend to the Word of God.

THE SPIRIT

The second conception with which we have to work in our theology of worship is the Spirit. The doctrine of the Spirit is, I suppose, of all doctrines the most complex, and thought on the subject easily becomes confused, or, at least, passes beyond the limit up to which discussion is possible. So far as worship is concerned, however, certain things seem clear.

The fellowship of the Spirit is realized in the worshipping community; and the worshipping community is constituted by the fellowship of the Spirit. What Acts and the Epistles say of the gifts of the Spirit seems to indicate that it is through the worship of the community that these are apprehended, and it is in the worship of the community that many, if not all, find their most complete expression. Wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, tongues, interpretation, healing, miracles—all are social in their origin and operation. And not least faith—the response of trust and obedience to the Word.

To be in the Spirit, then, whatever else it may or may not mean, is to be in the community; and in so far as we worship God in Spirit, we worship Him from within the community. It is worth noting that the service which, I think, all Christians would agree is most completely an act of worship is also an act of communion; what we do then we do as the Body. For my own part, I find that this communal aspect of worship becomes increasingly important

in my approach to it. To worship is to participate in the self-offering of the Church; to be part of what the worshipping community does, has done and will do. One finds oneself asking less and less such questions as: "Did I find that service deeply moving?" "Did I agree with those points the preacher made?" "Do I feel a better man for having watered my little plant called reverence?" and so on. Now, in worship, the important point seems to be that the faith of the Church is being expressed and one has part in that. I find some refuge from my own confusion of mind in the faith of the Church, and from my own coldness of heart in the love of the Church. My fellow-worshippers become increasingly important to my thought of the significance of worship. And not those I see only, but the Church militant through all the years and the Church triumphant in eternity: and the thought that, in the act of worship, one has part in all that.

I referred above to the danger of subjectivism in worship. Here we join issue with the kindred danger of individualism. If worship is worship in the Spirit, then surely preoccupation with our individual reactions to what is being done will be taken up into the thought of the act of worship as the act of the whole community. Just as our sense of communion with God should be most intense during the act of worship, so should our sense of participation in the Church. There is surely something theologically inadequate in the notion, seldom expressed but often underlying our thought of worship, that a service is an occasion in which a lot of individuals come together so that each may receive his own private bit of light and inspiration. There are some aspects of Baptist worship admirably suited to guard against this danger of individualism; for example, the common practice of assembling the whole local Church (theoretically, anyhow) for the Lord's Supper and all taking the bread and wine *together*. But one could wish that there were more of the fact of community in our common practice. We sing hymns together; and some, though not all, among us find hymn-singing a completely satisfactory form of worship and look for little else. And we say the Lord's Prayer together. But why not more participation in prayer? Why do we not confess our sins together and give thanks together? We do not like creeds, but there is something to be said for a congregation reciting a creed together—as substituting, for the worshipper's preoccupation with his own inadequate reflections, an identification of mind with the historic faith of the Church. But I am anticipating practical matters, to which I shall turn in a moment.

To summarise so far: there are two conceptions essential to our theology of worship—the Word and the Spirit: God as Truth and Love: worship as communication and participation. They are, of course, complementary to one another. Baptism, for example, is associated both with faith in the Word and with the gift of the

Spirit. Of the Lord's Supper Calvin said that it is both the promise contained in Christ's words of institution and the work of the Holy Spirit which renders it a true means of grace. The Spirit illuminates our understanding of the Word; but we are instructed to try the spirits whether they be of God, and the Spirit that is of God we know by His witness to the Living Word.

II. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I should now like to bring before the reader's attention two questions; they are related to one another and I think that they both arise from what has been said so far.

DIFFERENT SORTS OF WORSHIP

The first is: Are there different sorts of worship? Not, of course, are there denominational differences?—obviously there are; but, is there room within one tradition and one theology of worship—our own to be precise—for different kinds of service? Does it make sense, for instance, to talk about worship that is evangelical as distinct from worship that is devotional?

This question arises in my own mind, not so much from theological, as from practical, considerations. I am impressed by the vast differences between religious occasions to all of which we apply more or less identical orders of worship. I am impressed, to be more specific, by the differences between the congregation—and the whole atmosphere of the thing—at a Billy Graham meeting, and at my own Sunday evening service. And I wonder if the same form of worship is really appropriate to both. I concede that the order: Hymn—Lesson—Hymn—Prayer—Hymn—Sermon—Hymn, is admirably suited to an evangelical meeting. But the assumption upon which we proceed is apparently that every service ought to be, in tone and intention, an evangelical meeting. It is this assumption which I call in question.

The proclamation and the heeding of the Word—yes: that is fixed. But how are you going to do it?—surely that question is open and admits of different answers according to the occasion. We are supposed to have inherited a tradition of freedom and spontaneity in worship, and yet we are hidebound in many of our own views on this subject. Hidebound as to what makes a hymn "rousing," what makes a prayer "sincere," and what makes a sermon a sermon. I am not, mark you, advocating the introduction of pleasing novelties in order to make services more "attractive." I am asking whether the Word of claim and succour and the response thereto of trust and obedience, for all men at all times, fits into the same forms. And if the answer is "No," then here is a subject about which we ought to be thinking far more carefully and honestly than many of us do.

If anyone asks what precisely I have in mind, here are one or two points :

(1) Would it enrich the spiritual life of our churches if we had more services devoted to the reading of the Bible and response thereto in meditation and prayer? (The increasing use of the Service of Nine Lessons at Christmas is not to be explained solely by the fact that it gets the minister out of having to prepare a sermon and the congregation of having to listen to one; it has a value of its own which we might realize more extensively.)

(2) Do we hold Communion services often enough? Once a month it is usually; but would we not do well to adopt the practice of some Scottish Baptist churches and hold Communion every Sunday? And, so far as the arrangement of the service is concerned, how do we see the relation of the liturgy of the Word to the liturgy of the Table?

(3) Could we not replace the sermon at some of our evening services by relaying broadcast discussions or T.V. features? The claim and succour of the Word can, as we would all admit, be more effectively presented in these ways, sometimes at least, than through preaching from a pulpit. The B.B.C. would almost certainly co-operate, if churches saw the possibilities in this kind of thing.

(4) One would like to see the introduction of some more theologically adequate liturgical forms into our worship. There are encouraging signs of this in some quarters, and I will return to this point in a moment.

The point I make now is simply that we must not be afraid of change in our forms of worship. We must not be afraid of new forms nor unwilling to learn from other Christian communions. And all this, not so much from the motive that we must make our services more attractive in order to get people there and get them converted; but from the motive that worship is the life of the Church and we are not living to the full.

LITURGICAL DEVELOPMENT

My second main question is: Is there room and need for liturgical development amongst us? Here, of course, I am using "liturgy" in a restricted sense. Strictly speaking, every church has its liturgy; but the reader will understand what is meant by liturgical, as distinct from free, worship. The question then, is: Is there room and need for the use of liturgical, as well as free, forms of worship amongst us? The two are not incompatible; there is some ancient precedent for combining them. In the fourth and fifth centuries, for instance, the "drift" of prayers, rather than the exact formula was given; and in the Roman Church in the sixth century, some measure of improvisation was practised within the prescribed liturgical framework.

The use of prescribed liturgical forms provides some remedy for two defects of entirely free worship :

(1) One is lack of theological wholeness. So much depends upon the minister—surely, too much. Every man has his own limited insights; to take the simplest example, for every man there are some passages of Scripture which seem much more meaningful than others, and the likelihood is that, when the choice of lessons depends upon him alone, these others never get read in his services. And what is true of lessons, is no less true of the hymns we choose, the prayers we pray and the sermon subjects we select. From such individual predilections a liturgy in some degree delivers one and substitutes for them the collective wisdom and experience of the Church. Something would be gained (and need anything be lost?), if we had order-books prescribing themes, lessons for the day subjects for prayers, even hymns. This would conduce to the proclamation of the whole Gospel. The short answer is, of course, that any man can do this for himself; and up to a point that is so. But the danger of home-made liturgies is that they will fail to express the wholeness of the Gospel just as entirely free worship may. The preparation of a liturgy is a task calling for the collective wisdom and experience of the Church, and we should need to find some means of working this out in the light of the Reformed tradition concerning liturgy. The aim all the time is theological adequacy. It is important to emphasize that; because people sometimes assume that if you say a word in favour of liturgical forms, you must be advocating them on the ground that they provide for a more dignified, grammatical, eloquent, or better-bred act of worship. And they ask whether all that is as important as sincerity. Of course it isn't. But such considerations are entirely beside the point. The point is that the wholeness of the Gospel should be in our worship.

(2) The second defect in our kind of free worship is lack of congregational participation. This, of course, need not be a defect of free worship; the latter can be, and amongst us it once was, punctuated by hearty "Amen's," "Hallelujah's," "Praise the Lords'!" But we are more restrained than our fathers or some of our coloured brethren. In many churches the congregation does not even say "Amen" at the close of the prayers, and I have found that, if you suggest they should, they suspect you of "unBaptist" activities! It is, of course, conceivable, and perhaps in the case of some choice souls it is the case, that a worshipper should sit silent through a whole service and yet be one in heart and mind with the minister and participate in all he says and does. But, on psychological, as well as theological, grounds there is everything to be said for participation which is active. An act of worship is the act of the whole worshipping congregation; it is desirable that what is done should be done, as far as possible, by the whole congregation. This is why there is much to be said for responsive readings and

prayers, for prayers said together, and for affirmations of faith repeated together. What is done, all must do. Just as all take the bread, all drink the cup.

We are not faced in this matter with an either-or. We need both the spiritually uplifting directness and intimacy of the free approach to God and the theological adequacy of liturgical forms, enshrining the experience of the Church and hallowed by use. The notion that you must have either one or the other is surely mistaken. I appreciate, of course, that there are two schools of thought here, which may be differentiated as the exclusive and the eclectic. The exclusive was ably represented by the Rev. Kenneth Parry in his moderatorial address to the F.C.F.C. Congress a few years ago in Liverpool; he spoke appreciatively of Roman, Anglican and Orthodox forms of worship, but said he thought the mixing of things is the great evil, and that those of us who have inherited the free tradition of worship should preserve it pure and unalloyed. The eclectic school, on the other hand, takes the view that we have much to learn from each other, and worship—like Church life in general—is enriched by the influence of different traditions upon one another.

I respect the exclusive view, but incline strongly to the eclectic. I think a growing number, of the younger people especially, in our churches are dissatisfied with our traditional form of worship, the more so if they have had some experience of other forms. There could not, of course, be any question of trying to foist on to an unwilling denomination practices which only appeal to a few. And it is not a case of that. What seems to me important is that within our denomination there should be discussion, exchange of view, experiment, concerning worship—and all of it on a respectable theological plane. We have groups discussing, and promoting discussion, on Church unity, evangelism, baptism—and perhaps other subjects. Worship is as important as any of these—and, indeed, is not separable from them. It is a subject which should be brought before our denomination, and, if necessary, a group or groups should be formed to spread information and stimulate thought on it.

I write this as one who grew up in a small Baptist church, where worship was conducted in a highly spontaneous and extempore manner by lay preachers. In these services I had my first experience of the Word and the Spirit, and of membership within the worshipping community. I am deeply sensible of my own debt to such Baptist worship. Far from thinking poorly of it, I yield to no man in my appreciation of its value as one sort of worship. But I think we have something to learn from communions with a liturgical tradition different from our own. And it is surely paying your denomination no small compliment to assume that it is capable of learning.

W. D. HUDSON.