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

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

Structure and Form in Church Worship.

FROM the beginning Christian worship was not only the creation of contemporary faith but also in some measure the precipitate of the faith of the past. This has continued to be true of the worship of succeeding centuries, and is no accident; for liturgy embodies the Gospel, and consequently there has always been the liturgical recognition, expressed in one way or another, that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is also the God of Israel, is the Lord of history.¹ Tradition is thus of the essence of worship. As Daniel Jenkins put it, "The very assembly of the congregation for worship testifies to the fact of the continuity of the people of God. They are able to meet together in that place and on that day only because the faith has been effectively 'traditioned' by those who, in the past, found God faithful. Like Israel in the Promised Land, they are able to argue that they would not be where they are if God were not a reality who had entered into a covenant with their fathers and who continues to honour it with his children."² The group responsible for the pamphlet on *The Meaning and Practice of Ordination among Baptists* express a similar understanding when they write: "The Church manifests its existence as for the glory of God by its continued act of worship."³

The tradition of the redemptive event was scrupulously transmitted in the Apostolic age⁴; so also was that of the liturgical structure embodying it.⁵ Concerning the latter, the study of Oscar Cullman has revealed its basis to be sermon, prayer and supper.⁶ There never was a mere 'sermon service' for the fellowship of believers; the Lord's Supper was the basis and goal of every gathering.⁷ Some would think of this as originally a private worship⁸: whether this be true or not, what can be affirmed is the fusion of Word and Sacrament in a corporate act, proclaiming God's mighty acts of redemption, creation and providence, and offering all life in an action of high consecration.

This pattern of worship became the common tradition of East and West alike, but by the time of the Reformers its shape had been largely lost: the preached Word has degenerated virtually to the point of disappearance and the Holy Supper had become corrupted into a Mass which the laity for the most part merely watched or paid for. Their work was an attempt to restore and preserve Apostolic purity. The Reformation, we are accustomed to say, was an age of biblical revival, when the Scriptures were made accessible

to the people and when the Gospel enshrined in the Scriptures was once more proclaimed with vigour and power. But it was also significantly an age of liturgical revival; if the Bible was translated, so also was the eucharistic office, and this latter was altered in various ways. "In each case," observes A. G. Hebert, "the aim was to recover what was conceived to be the right form and the right inner spirit of Christian worship, and thus recreate its true pattern . . . the intention in each case was not to repudiate but to restore the Great Tradition."⁹ Now Baptists come of Reformation stock, but of no one Reformation stream exclusively. There has been, in E. A. Payne's words,¹⁰ "variety in our life, and sometimes tension. . . . It is a rich and diverse tradition to which we are able to appeal." If we therefore apply these words to the structure of our worship and consider the work of the Reformers we may expect to find much that is instructive.

Luther, it appears, did not interrupt the tradition in any revolutionary way. He took over the Church service in its fundamental form and eliminated what was opposed to the central understanding of faith. By translating the service into the vernacular he gave the congregation access to the action which takes place in the service, and laid it open in order to evoke and strengthen their faith. For him, worship was not the contrivance of men, even of earnest men, to honour God; it was a means of intercourse with Himself presented to men by God.¹¹ All Lutheran orders still contain the shape of divine service as Word plus Sacrament. (In practice, however, the sacramental part is now left out, and the Supper is celebrated, as Goltzen says,¹² "only as a rare appendix, combined with a sort of general confession, for those few who stay behind 'after the church service'".

A stream of Reformation tradition to which increasing attention is now being given is that of the Anabaptist movement. This, according to W. M. S. West, was probably born on January 21st, 1525.¹³ The meetings on this and succeeding days were in private houses near Zurich, and eye-witness accounts of at least two meetings suggest the following order of service: Bible readings, challenging exposition, baptisms, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper with the reading of the words of institution, the breaking of bread and the pouring out of wine. "These brethren," as E. A. Payne remarks,¹⁴ "were forsaking and renouncing the Roman rather than the Reformed Church, for the latter did not really at that time exist." In view of other developments in Zurich, to which we now turn, it is worth noticing that their service, albeit in a sort of revivalist atmosphere, has the skeleton structure of the Great Tradition.

The Zwinglian Church separated Word and Sacrament from the beginning.¹⁵ It appears that a late medieval preaching service was

in existence which had lost all connection with the Eucharist, but which was upheld by those circles that were full of the new thought-forms of religious humanism. This service consequently found its place in those Churches which were under the City Councils, and in Julius Schweitzer's words, "the Fathers of the Reformed Church in Switzerland took over without scruple this order of things, which certainly afforded the Word and its preaching the desired scope, but permitted no introduction of the Sacrament into the general structure of the chief Sunday service . . . in consequence of which the way to the Lord's Table was barred to the Reformed Christian nearly every Sunday, while the service of the Word came to be stamped quite improperly as the service which is the only normal one and fully sufficient to the Christian." Now it is Bainton's opinion that Zwingli was a direct precursor of the English Puritans who maintained no close contact with Zurich.¹⁶ Perhaps, then, the English Puritan tradition of non-sacramental worship owes more to late medieval humanism than to Reformation according to the Word of God?

Calvin, much more radical than Luther, had to be content with a compromise in things liturgical, for he also had to contend with a City Council (City Councils again!) The service which took shape at Geneva was certainly not an adequate expression of his theology, although it provided the pattern for several Reformed Churches throughout Europe. He himself emphasised the desirability of frequent communion, as, for instance, in this passage from the *Ordonnances of 1537*¹⁷: "It were much to be desired that the administration of Jesus Christ's Holy Supper should take place at least every Sunday, when the multitude are assembled, in view of the great consolation which the faithful derive therefrom. . . . It was not instituted by Jesus in order that men might do this in remembrance of Him two or three times a year, but for a continual exercise of our faith and love, which the congregation of Christians should use as often as they meet together." Can we not conclude that the continuing practice of monthly or even less frequent celebrations in those Churches reflecting Genevan influence owes more to the prejudice of the civil authorities than to the doctrine of the Reformer? At least, however, Calvin retained the eucharistic shape for Sunday morning worship: even when the bread and wine were regrettably absent, the service fell into the two parts, the reading and preaching of the Word of God and the fellowship of prayers after the sermon.¹⁸

The conscious aim and desire of English Baptists remains identical with that of all the Reformers, namely, to restore and preserve Apostolic purity. Indeed, it is an assumption commonly held that we have achieved this in all essentials. But whereas it is praiseworthy to describe ourselves as a New Testament Church if by that some-

what ambiguous phrase we mean a people always seeking to be obedient to God's revelation through the Scriptures, it is to stand in peril of the Romish attitude which waits intransigently for all other erring bodies to see the light if, as sometimes seems to be the inference, we mean a people who have already obeyed and who have no need to check further their ways. The obligation for all who come of Reformation stock is to listen constantly for the Word of God in the spirit of obedience, and in that sense at least Adolf Schlatter's words are true¹⁹: "The first service which man must render to God is to listen to him."²⁰

In the light of Apostolic practice and Reformed tradition, two submissions may now be made. First, the structure of worship in our churches is urgently in need of revision. Although there is a growing number of them where the Lord's Supper is complementary to the Word within one service, these probably do this no more than once a month. Surely a weekly celebration of the feast is the goal towards which we should all be moving? This will be achieved, one supposes, when after constant effort and teaching, our people desire it with all their heart. Meantime, and secondly, those who are responsible for the preparation and order of worship have an obligation to restore the traditional structure as the regular order of one service each week, whether the Table is spread or not, as Calvin did. This service, in its most elemental form, may be described thus:

- (a) The Approach, including a call to worship, a hymn of praise, and prayers of adoration, confession and supplication.
- (b) The Word of God, including lessons from the Old Testament, the Epistles and the Gospels, and the sermon.
- (c) The Sacrifice of Thanksgiving, which, in the absence of Communion, could still include the offertory, the prayer of thanksgiving and self-dedication, the Lord's Prayer and a final hymn.

Such a structure fulfils the biblical truth of God's initiative, makes the Word of God central and presupposes the Lord's Supper as its proper climax.

The form of worship is not the same thing as its structure. The structure of the Anabaptist services referred to above and that of Calvin's ideal are similar; their forms are poles apart. On the other hand, although the form of Anglican Mattins is far removed from that of a Free Church service, their structures are very similar. Form inevitably exists in worship: our choice is only between different kinds of form. One often hears Free Churchmen speak of the formality or stereotyped nature of, say, an Anglican service. This is, of course, a just description, but so it would be of the usual order of service in a Baptist Church. We also have our forms, and W. D. Hudson argues that we should not be afraid of change in them²¹:

“Not,” he says, “so much for the motive that we must make our services more attractive to get people there and get them converted; but for the motive that worship is the life of the Church and we are not living to the full.” Professor Cullman cannot resist a similar affirmation in his study of early Christian worship²²: “We must assert here and now that the services of worship in the Protestant Churches of our own era are very much poorer, not only in respect of the free working of the Spirit, but also in respect of what is liturgical and especially in respect of what is aimed at in the gatherings of the community.” The following three things will serve as examples of a consideration of form in worship :

First, the relative functions of minister and people. The minister’s part is an immediate reminder that although tradition is important, it is not the whole of worship by any means; the congregation of Christ always meets in expectation.²³ Indeed, the Liturgy constantly relates past, present, and future : the Supper, belonging as it does to the tradition—what we have received—is yet “done” in the present, this very doing being the proclamation that Christ is known in ever-renewed decision “until He come”; it is this expectation that keeps the Church sober and vigilant. In the same way the sermon, depending on the tradition—for example, in its use of the Scriptures, is none the less the place of a present encounter with God. As Jenkins puts it, “It is important to note here that the Word of God is not spoken simply through the minister, as some Protestants have implied. It is spoken by God in the waiting upon Him of the congregation, in the encounter between His Word in Scripture and the real situation of that particular group of people. . . . The minister has the dialectical task of so speaking that men may hear, not him, but the voice of the living God.”

When this function is thus strictly understood, we are delivered from what Maxwell calls “the sacerdotalism of the single voice.”²⁴ The sermon is contributing to the whole action and leading to thanksgiving and consecration. The layman’s “liturgy” is also contributing, and herein lies the theology of congregational action in what is, quite literally, *corporate* worship : each member of the Body has his service to perform in the context of the action of the whole People. The functions of minister and people interlock, so that, for instance, it is for the latter rather than the former to say “Amen” after the prayers. Liturgical action belongs to the whole Body, and this ought to be expressed in visible and audible manner : the Amens, Jerome once said of the worship to which he was accustomed, sounded like thunder.

Secondly, due regard may be paid to the usage of posture and gesture. (An example would be the position we adopt for prayer : in our private prayers most of us kneel; in our churches the pious crouch and the careless slouch.) We are constituted not “pure”

spirit but embodied spirit—or perhaps animated body—so that our spirit expresses itself through the instrumentality of the body. In public worship this may well take an unusual—i.e. a ceremonial—form, “familiar in the sense of being expected” although not “familiar in the sense of being colloquial or commonplace”; to use the words of C. S. Lewis.²⁵ Mr. Lewis cites Christmas dinner as an example from another sphere, noting that no one is surprised by the menu although everyone recognises that it is not ordinary fare. “The modern habit,” he writes,²⁶ “of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the offender’s inability to forget himself in the rite.”

Thirdly and briefly, there is a place for both “set” and “free” prayers. This matter has now been liberated from the swinging pendulum of individual prejudice, so that it is generally recognised that the refusal to use the one jettisons Christian tradition whilst the denial of the other presumes no place for the continuous inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, structure and form in worship are important because liturgy is a theological issue: *lex orandi lex credendi* (as a man prays, so he believes). No doubt this is the reason why the Reformation was an age of liturgical as well as of biblical revival: the Church’s worship must be a declaration of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose revelation is recorded in the Scriptures. Not only must the beholding world be in no doubt as to the nature of the God we adore, but also the Christian ought to be able to find in his regular diet of worship a perpetual reminder of the Gospel in its wholeness. The Body must be edified as prayer fortifies belief and faith moves out in prayer; as the living Word of God is heard ever and anew; and as through sacramental action the fellowship of believers continually finds its life united with Christ and with all His people. The test of the evangelical character of this worship will not be so much in its precise resemblance to the details of New Testament practice so much as in its setting forth of that whole action of worship which is the New Testament itself.²⁷ For like the Church in heaven, we have the vocation ever to proclaim our God as Redeemer, Creator and King. “Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!’ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all therein, saying, ‘To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!’ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ and the elders fell down and worshipped.”²⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Cf. the comments of Hoskyns & Davey on the Nicene Creed in *The Riddle of the New Testament*, p. 9.
- ² *Tradition and the Spirit*, p. 183.
- ³ Paragraph 11.
- ⁴ 1 Cor. xv: 3 ff.
- ⁵ 1 Cor. xi: 23 ff.
- ⁶ *Early Christian Worship*, p. 20.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 29.
- ⁸ e.g. G. Dix *The Shape of the Liturgy*, p. 16 ff.
- ⁹ *Ways of Worship*, ed. Edwall, Hayman & Maxwell, p. 67.
- ¹⁰ *The Fellowship of Believers*, pp. 14 and 16.
- ¹¹ Cf. *Christian Worship*, ed. Micklem, p. 128.
- ¹² *Ways of Worship*, p. 80.
- ¹³ Cf. *Christian Baptism*, ed. Gilmore, pp. 243 ff.
- ¹⁴ *The Baptist Movement in the Reformation and Onwards*, p. 9.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Y. Brilioth, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice*, p. 162. *Ways of Worship*, p. 131.
- ¹⁶ *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, p. 86.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Y. Brilioth, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
- ¹⁸ W. D. Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, p. 26.
- ¹⁹ *The Church in the New Testament Period*, p. 63.
- ²⁰ Baptists, it may be remembered, have the heritage of Smyth's Gainsborough Covenant: ". . . to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them . . ."
- ²¹ *Baptist Quarterly*, Jan., 1959, p. 9.
- ²² *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ²³ Cf. the forceful exposition of this in Daniel Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 186 f.
- ²⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- ²⁵ *Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 20.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 16.
- ²⁷ Cf. A. M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, pp. 96, 103, 118.
- ²⁸ *Revelation* v: 11-14.

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