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EVANGELICAL WORSHIP - SACRAMENTAL, CHARISMATIC  
OR BIBLICAL?

by

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There is no doubting the importance of corporate public worship for the Christian. (1) It is perhaps the one single activity in which every Christian engages - not all are theologians, evangelists or pastors, but all worship in one way or another. In fact, so important is worship that it constitutes us as a body of believers. It is usually accepted that going to church is not only the proper thing to do, but also that it is in some way a necessary mark of the Christian.

It is not surprising then that worship is an important factor in identifying the Christian and distinguishing him/her from other Christians who worship differently. Our concept of Christianity and our particular tradition is determined by the pattern of worship which we have learned far more than any other factor. This means that there are powerful forces of conservatism to be found in worship, but none so great that they cannot be overcome if the circumstances are right, as a study of the many changes that have taken place in history of worship clearly shows. (2)

We are currently in yet another period of change in worship practices, which is affecting most Christians in some way. Thus, for several generations, the Liturgical Movement has changed the orders of service, music, buildings and the attitudes of the worshippers of the most mainline denominations. Then in more recent times still, the charismatic movement has been a revolutionary force amongst even the most conservative of fellowships. Evangelicals have been affected along with the rest, even if in some cases it is only indirectly or perhaps by way of reaction! To respond positively to influences for change requires an understanding of the principles of worship, and just as importantly, a knowledge of the historical forces that have caused us to worship in the way that we do.

One of the most obvious influences on evangelical worship is revivalism, dating especially from the 19th Century American experience, which turned worship into evangelism and placed a premium on the invitation following the sermon as the climax of worship. Everything else that took place, such as congregational singing, prayers, and special music was simply a build-up to the sermon and appeal. Later, Pentecostal/charismatic worship widened the invitation to include a whole range of deliverance and healing ministries. In revivalistic worship, the invitation has replaced the communion as the focal point of the service, and has created a particular mood for worship and a distinctive style of preaching. (In some cases, nervousness about a public invitation has forced the preacher to omit it, or to ask for a response in some private or individual way, but the dynamics of the service remain unchanged.)

Another important influence which is closely connected with revivalism has been pietism, dating originally from 17th Century Germany, but spreading quickly in the English speaking world. It placed the emphasis upon the response of the "warm heart" in reaction to a cold formal confessional orthodoxy. It has resulted in the focus on the Bible as a devotional book, practical and emotional sermons and a form of worship that may use almost any means to inspire the congregation to a sense of God's presence and to holy living. The sermon is typically referred to as "the message".

Also closely linked historically with pietism is the influence of puritanism. Arising in the 16th Century English church, this is a movement which sought a thorough reformation of Christianity according to Scripture, focused in personal regeneration, strict morality and the elimination of the relics of Catholicism from worship, faith and practice. Thus there was heavy emphasis upon biblical exposition, Bible reading, long extempore prayers and a ban upon all man-made ceremonies, service books, vestments, symbols and other similar paraphernalia which diverted attention from the Word.

This distinctive trend was further reinforced in the age of reason by an emphasis upon the rational content of worship, especially in the form of eloquent sermons of high literary and intellectual merit. This was in part contrary to the Puritan emphasis upon personal religion, and was later counteracted to a large extent by the influence of Pietism. However, it left a legacy in the form of a strong tradition amongst evangelicals that the sermon was to be primarily an occasion for Bible teaching.

All of these influences modified the basis of evangelical worship which had been laid down in the 16th Century when the medieval Roman worship had been extensively reformed, but not substantially restructured. By the end of the medieval period, worship in the west had become a priestly pageant, centering on the sacrifice of the mass and acted out in high ritual often to the accompaniment of complex music in the sanctuary of the massive Gothic churches and cathedrals. There was little for the congregation to do except to wait in the nave (perhaps cut off physically from the sanctuary by a railing or screen) performing their own private devotions and listening for the bells which signalled the act of consecration of the elements and the elevation of the host. They communicated once a year, if then, and only received the wafer. Masses and chapels for a host of special purposes abounded, as did saints days and feasts, penance and indulgences. A combination of clerical and lay ignorance, ecclesiastical power, complex doctrines such as transubstantiation, and traditions which had developed over a millenium or more created a system that was wide open to abuse. But even in its basic form, it was unrecognizable in comparison with the worship of the church in its first two or three centuries.

The first need of the Protestant Reformers was to remove the abuses and then to alter the worship to suit their newly rediscovered experience of salvation as it was summed up in the key words: *sola fide, sola gratia, sola Scriptura*. Thus the Canon of the Mass, the great central prayer, formerly one of thanksgiving for creation, providence and redemption, but which now enshrined the instrument of transubstantiation, was the first target of Luther who eliminated it almost completely and did not replace it with any substantial substitute. All references to priestly sacrifice were removed and the mass was made an act of fellowship by believers who were sincerely attempting to live the Christian life. The extensive use of Scripture and popular preaching were restored with a heavy didactic emphasis so that those who participated might be well instructed.

Attempts by Luther and Calvin to restore weekly communion were thwarted by civic authorities and by years of popular tradition, so that ultimately Zwingli's highly consistent and radically non-sacramental practice became the norm for Protestant worship, despite the more sacramental approach of others. Even Calvin's mediating and sophisticated views which created a positive link between word and sacrament as the spoken and visible Word could not gain a popular foothold, and in time, the main Sunday service

was universally believed to be a preaching service, with communion observed infrequently in simple literal obedience to the example of Scripture but with little or no intrinsic significance. Exceptions to this basic rule include two churches with no sacraments at all - the Society of Friends who reject all forms, and the Salvation Army who are highly structured but omit sacraments for practical reasons. Two other anomalous groups are the Brethren Movements and Churches of Christ/Disciples who celebrate the eucharist weekly but for biblicistic and not liturgical reasons. The distinctive worship patterns of the former (especially the "open" meeting) may be characterised most accurately supplementary to the standard worship of the wider church and consequently not as an independent, comprehensive form in its own right.

The reformers responded well to the needs of their own context, even if the patterns of worship they developed were somewhat reactionary. Due to their circumstances and lack of knowledge of early Christian worship, they could only be expected to work within the framework of worship known to them, rather than restore primitive forms, even supposing that this might have been feasible or desirable. Nevertheless, this meant that one of the most important legacies of the Reformation was the fact that public worship and communion (when held) was based on the strongly penitential and clerical model of the medieval period, rather than upon the joyous community celebration of the pre-Constantinian church. (3)

Adequate knowledge of this period was not available until modern times, when along with cultural forces, the Biblical Theology movement and renewed interest in ecclesiology, new understandings of primitive church worship contributed to the 20th Century Liturgical Movement and produced wholesale changes in the practice of virtually every church, Eastern Orthodoxy excepted. (4) One of the major changes included a restoration of the classic order of the eucharist as the regular Sunday worship. This consisted basically of a greeting, followed by lectionary readings of the Old and New Testaments, a sermon and pastoral prayers or a litany with the Peace. Then followed the eucharist proper with the bringing of the offering and the elements, a comprehensive prayer of thanksgiving by the leader complemented by a congregational "Amen". Then came the communion and finally the dismissal. The main eucharistic prayer followed a common format consisting of first an introductory dialogue (The Sursum Corda), an initial thanksgiving (or Preface), the Sanctus and Benedictus, further thanksgiving and invocation, the words of institution, the remembrance and self-offering, invocation of the blessing of the Spirit and doxology. Recovery of this pattern has tended strongly to eliminate denominational differences in worship and to produce an "ecumenical consensus" at least amongst mainline churches. (5)

This classic order of service requires the participation of many people and involves active congregational involvement, effective music, and a carefully prepared system of readings coordinating with some kind of church year or calendar. It also demands a physical arrangement which enables the leaders and congregation to gather around the Lord's Table (at least in a symbolic manner) and to express their faith in adequate forms, including provision for bodily and symbolic expression and movement. It is of course conducted in the vernacular using a popular translation of Scripture with the exposition and other speech in a familiar mode. Culturally relevant symbolism and art is most appropriate. Overall, it is a service in which the whole people of God join together to celebrate his gracious redemption and providence with joy and thanksgiving.

In most cases, churches using this tradition of worship have interpreted it in a highly liturgical and strongly sacramental manner, whereas evangelicals have generally retained their old patterns with only minor modifications. They have also persisted in their free church approach with a strongly Zwinglian outlook that depends upon the spiritual presence of Christ and sees the material and symbolic as merely the outward expression of the inward faith of the believer. This interpretation of worship was certainly justified in certain contexts, such as the Reformation when there was a corresponding over-emphasis upon sacramentalism. But in other less polarised circumstances, a more holistic approach may need to be explored if the full range of human experience is to be served.

But, as has been noted earlier, evangelical worship has been influenced by a variety of historical forces which have left it in a shape which is far from ideal. As far as some evangelicals are now concerned, it is excessively rationalistic, emotional and unbalanced and therefore too impoverished to serve as an effective vehicle of devotion for the mature Christian. A lack of historical awareness, undue subservience to tradition and too great an emphasis upon ministries such as evangelism, Bible teaching, development of personal piety or church growth, has masked these deficiencies. However, the need for a renewal of evangelical worship has become increasingly more urgent in recent times. (6) Therefore some evangelicals have already responded by turning to other forms of worship. For example, some have adopted the dominant sacramental liturgy having encountered it through their theological studies, ecumenical contacts or in response to a feeling for a more comprehensive mode of worship. But whether they have employed sound principles in so doing is another matter.

One group that has taken the sacramental approach as a result of careful consideration of its claims is represented by Robert E. Webber of Wheaton College and Thomas Howard, formerly of Gordon College, both prestigious centres of American evangelicalism. (7) Views typical of these two writers were also expressed at a conference held in Chicago in 1977 which as part of its statement issued "a call to sacramental integrity", and referred to the doctrines of creation and incarnation which show that "God's activity is manifested in a material way". Hence, the Call stated,

"We need to recognize that the grace of God is mediated through faith by the operation of the Holy Spirit in a notable way in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Here the church proclaims, celebrates and participates in the death and resurrection of Christ in such a way as to nourish her members throughout their lives in anticipation of the consummation of the kingdom."

As Thomas Howard put it, being "evangelical is not enough" - it is necessary (and possible) to add a sacramental element to classical evangelicalism if it is to be as complete and as fully biblical as it claims.

These catholic evangelicals point to the history of the church and Scripture as sources for a pattern of worship based on the doctrines of creation and incarnation which is focused in a "theology of enactment". (8) This means simply that worship is a "dramatic enactment of the relationship that exists between ourselves and God". In ordinary life when we "enact" an event, we give it meaning and purpose. Hence, "worship re-creates and thus re-presents the historical event" of redemption and so

"aligns the believer with the Christ-event and with the community of the faithful throughout history. Therefore, when worship is acted out in faith, the believer experiences again the refreshment of his or her relationship to God and spontaneously experiences the joy of salvation."

According to this view, worship is Christo-centric and "recapitulates the work of Christ by proclaiming it through Word and rite. In this action the church, the body of Jesus, is actualized. That is, it comes together and can be seen and experienced in a visible and concrete manner." Or to put it otherwise, "when believers come together, the church as the people of the Christ-event becomes a reality". This takes place through "the physical signs of Christ's presence in the church" which are the people, offices, gifts, Word and sacraments. These signs "communicate the spiritual reality they represent" because "God has made His material and visible world in such a way that it may become the vehicle through which spiritual realities are signified and realized" and because he has committed himself in a special way to the gospel sacraments.

In contrast with the more common Zwinglian memorialism, catholic evangelicalism has the advantage of giving worship (and particularly the sacraments) a great deal of meaning because it is an integral part of redemptive history. This view also creates a strong historical consciousness which enhances the sense of fellowship with the universal church and facilitates the enrichment of worship by incorporation of materials from other traditions. The classic pattern also emphasises the role of the church as the people of God and encourages participation by various people according to their gifts and experience which is in accord with the evangelical principle of the priesthood of all believers. Since "enactment" is a "phenomenon that is absolutely central to universal human practice", this form of worship also enables the spiritual and the physical to be integrated in holistic union whereas Zwinglianism is based upon a complete distinction between the two.

However, despite these positive features, evangelicals need to be cautious about this new approach because it makes no specific allowance for the revelation of God's will through the Word or for the theology of atonement, both of which are key elements in evangelical theology. Its concept of sacramental presence cuts directly across the idea of the real personal presence of Christ, the risen Lord, "wherever two or three are gathered" addressing his people directly through his Spirit. According to Raymond Abba this is the "basic liturgical principle of the Reformation". (9) Therefore to negate it in any way, as sacramentalism does, is a serious weakness.

For the evangelical, worship is essentially a matter of an encounter with God in which his glory and praise are set forth. It is realised through a personal response to his gracious revelation and the proclamation of his Word. This contrasts strongly with the "mystery theory" of worship which sees the "liturgy [as] the making present in word, symbol and sacrament of the paschal mystery of Christ so that through its celebration the men and women of today may make a saving encounter with God". (10) This is based upon the sequence whereby first the incarnate Christ is "the sacrament of the Father"; then the church is "the sacrament of Christ"; finally, there is the liturgy whose role is "to manifest and convey the redeeming love of Christ". But God's approach to man cannot be confined or

even be focused upon the material channel, since it is on a direct person-to-person basis. However, mankind's praise of the God who makes himself known can be expressed in many more ways than the mainly mental response so characteristic of traditional evangelicalism. Indeed, if it is to be a genuine response of mankind as a whole, a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1) then it must be fully expressive of the Christian's entire range of life experiences. Thus it must be carried out in ways which are characteristic of Christian truth and of redeemed humanity. (11)

Evangelical worship is "in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24) and so outward forms are secondary to the activity of the Spirit. Hence there is no one form of worship that has intrinsic or absolute authority. Forms of worship must be judged only by the Word itself. This raises serious questions about the role given by the Catholic evangelicals to the forms and content of worship developed by the historic church (especially in the first six centuries) in determining legitimate ways of worship for all Christians. (12)

If liturgical and sacramental worship has made only a limited impact upon evangelicalism, the opposite is true for the influence of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement. (13) All traditions have been affected by it, but evangelicalism more widely than most because of the closer affinities between the two. The charismatic movement has broken down long held traditions through the re-introduction of modern music complete with hand clapping and other bodily movements; much greater informality, a sense of fellowship and much active congregational participation have destroyed the old patterns of clerical monopoly; a spirit of enthusiastic joy has entered worship and direct praise of all members of the Godhead (using the second personal form of address - Praise you, Lord - rather than - Praise God from whom all blessings....) has become a special feature arising out of an assurance of complete confidence in God. This assurance is regularly bolstered by the occurrence of the supernatural (healings, deliverances, conversions, tongues, interpretations) in the service of worship itself. In fact, it can be claimed that the charismatic movement has been far more successful than the Liturgical Movement in restoring some of these primitive qualities of worship, although there is little in common between them. (14) When liturgical worship is affected by the charismatic influence, it takes on more of the characteristics of free worship even though many worshippers testify to a revived appreciation of their own traditions.

The ready acceptance of the charismatic renewal by evangelicals is also a case of the revitalization of traditional forms, although in this case it is free worship and not set forms that are in question. This "revitalization theory" is the simplest way to understanding the significance of the charismatic movement for worship. In the case of evangelicalism, it can be regarded as essentially another revival movement like those that have occurred earlier, such as the 18th Century evangelical revival in England and the various awakenings in the United States. According to this view, any excesses that exist are likely to fall away in due course and its lasting legacy will be a renewed and more dynamic application of the essential principles of worship outlined above. As such the charismatic renewal may be welcomed by evangelicals, in principle at least.

But the polarization that has occurred in evangelicalism over the charismatic movement suggests that this simple re-vitalization theory does not provide an adequate explanation. Rather, it suggests that whatever else



may be true, the charismatic movement introduces significantly different principles of worship which are intuitively recognized as being ultimately incompatible with those of evangelicalism, in same way that sacramentalism is also recognized as being incompatible with evangelicalism.

There is little literature on the dynamics of pentecostal worship in general or on these crucial differences in particular. But observation and reflection on existing material and actual practice indicates that the basic difference lies in the role given to the Holy Spirit in relation to the worshipper and in the church as a whole. This can be illustrated by quoting from a charismatic writer:

Worship of the Father, then, is not merely man's spirit on earth responding to God's Spirit in Heaven; rather it is God's Spirit in man responding to God's Spirit in God. It is the Holy Spirit worshipping through us, and how much more capable He is at this than we are. (15)

This means that "true worship has always been both spiritual and in the Spirit". (16) This can also be illustrated by referring to a distinction between "praise" and "worship" which is sometimes made by charismatics:

Fundamentally, praise is an exuberance in the human soul/spirit that is expressed to God, while worship flows from God's Spirit who is resident in the spirit of man. Praise is redeemed man calling to God, while worship is God calling to God from within redeemed men. (17)

Thus the distinctive dynamic which controls charismatic worship is that the Holy Spirit is to control the worshipper so completely that the worshipper is taken over by the Spirit and becomes the instrument of the Spirit. This intimate union with God is the summum bonum of charismatic spirituality and, as such, accounts for the behaviour which is common in charismatic worship even by otherwise conservative and rather inhibited persons. However, worship of this kind has moved away from the "rational" and into the area of the mystical. From the evangelical perspective, the exaggerated role of the non-rational factor makes it seriously defective because it is contrary to the specific biblical teaching about worship (and the Christian life as a whole) which shows it to be a deliberate, purposeful response of the rational person to the grace of God. Paul in Romans 12:1-3 even refers to the surrender of the life to God as a "rational worship". According to the biblical doctrine of creation and redemption, mankind is created in the divine image and is able to respond directly to God who approaches him on a person-to-person basis, rather than losing the reality of personal response-ability and identity under the guise of a mystical movement of the Spirit.

Evangelical worship therefore needs to draw critically upon some of the insights of liturgical, sacramental and charismatic worship, but if it is to be faithful to its own biblical principles, it must remain "spiritual" (or "charismatic") and cannot become either cultic or mystical. That is, it must be free to respond to the leading of the Spirit and in conformity with the Word of God and be a true expression of the Christian experience and redeemed humanity of the people of God who comprise the worshipping congregation. It must not be hierarchical or professional, but must be the genuine experience of the whole Body of Christ in response to the Lord who is personally present by his Spirit and through the Word. No one form of worship will be adequate as a vehicle to express the whole

range of Christian experience; rather, each act of worship will need to be drawn up for the occasion and for the congregation, although patterns that have been found able to nourish Christians over the years will be valued as useful guides. Since worship is a human activity, a proper understanding of human emotions, group dynamics, symbolism, art and drama will be found useful in understanding, planning and leading worship.

Finally, since the New Testament sees the entire surrendered life as worship, (Romans 12:1) worship services as such will not perform the same function for evangelicals as for others. On the one hand, they will properly include occasions for fellowship, teaching and evangelism as well as preaching, the gospel ordinances, praise, prayer and thanksgiving; but also, the entire service, and even the dedicated life may be considered a means of divine blessing, which is only another way of saying that they are, as a whole, "sacramental"!

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#### NOTES

1. This paper is based upon the dissertation, Principles of Evangelical Worship", presented by the author to the Melbourne College of Divinity in partial fulfilment for the requirements of the Diploma in Liturgical Studies, 1986. The contents of this paper was also delivered as a lecture to the China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong, 20 January, 1987.
2. For the history of Christian worship, see such works as William H. Willimon, Word, Water, Wine and Bread (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1980) William D. Maxwell, An Outline of Christian Worship (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) Ilion T. Jones, A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship (New York: Abingdon, 1954), and Bard Thompson, Liturgies of the Western Church (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961)
3. Maxwell, op. cit. p.72f, Jones, op. cit. pp. 147, 161-3.
4. Willimon, op. cit. ch. 9.
5. Willimon, op. cit. pp.120, 33-38.
6. Robert E. Webber, Worship Old and New (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) pp. 11-13.
7. See R.E. Webber, Worship Old and New. Thomas Howard, who has since converted to Catholicism (Christianity Today 17 May, 1985) Evangelical is Not Enough (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1984); for the Chicago Conference, see Robert E. Webber and Donald Bloesch, The Orthodox Evangelicals (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1978) p. 14 and chapter 7. For interest in Anglican and Orthodox worship by evangelicals, see Robert E. Webber, Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals are Attracted to the Liturgical Church (Waco: Word, 1985) and Christianity Today 17 May, 1985.

8. Webber, Worship Old and New pp. 93-99.
9. Raymond Abba, Principles of Christian Worship (London, Oxford University Press, 1957) p. 45.
10. Chesalyn Jones et al., The Study of Liturgy (London: SPCK, 1980) p. 16.
11. For discussion of such matters as symbolism, time, space, ritual, see Webber, Worship Old and New chapters 9, 12-15 and James F. White, Introduction to Christian Worship (Nashville:Abingdon, 1983) chapters 2-5.
12. Webber, Worship Old and New p. 15.
13. The terms "charismatic" and "pentecostal" are being used here more or synonymously to refer to such beliefs and practices as the baptism of the Spirit, the use of spiritual gifts and a focus upon the miraculous (especially tongues) as evidence of the powerful presence of God in the believer and in the church.
14. J. I. Packer, "Charismatic Renewal", Christianity Today 7 March, 1980.
15. Judson Cornwall, Let Us Worship (Plainfield, Bridge Pub. 1983) p. 97.
16. ibid.
17. op. cit. pp. 146f, 151.

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#### QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the writer's view that the distinctive form of Brethren worship is best described as supplementary to existing forms of Christian worship and therefore it cannot be regarded as an independent pattern in its own right?
2. Given that most forms of Christian worship have come into existence as imitations of or reactions to previously existing forms, is it possible or even desirable to create new forms that aim to be authentically "biblical"? What answer is given, what principles should be followed in developing patterns of worship for today?
3. Is Christianity intrinsically sacramental and therefore must its worship be likewise?
4. Do evangelicals understand enough about the symbolism they employ in worship to escape the problems of symbolism?
5. Is charismatic worship guilty of over-emphasising "worship" (i.e. "praise") at the expense of intercession, confession and teaching etc.? What is likely to be final outcome of this state of affairs in the life of the individual and church far as the overall character of Christian life is concerned?

