

# THEOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF WORSHIP

## OUTLINING TWO WAYS TO WORSHIP

AUTHOR RHYNS BEZZANT

*Throughout history, Christians have engaged in many and varied forms of worship. But how do we decide how worship should look in the future? Rhys Bezzant provides theological criteria by which to evaluate models of worship to build a mature church with a right vision of God.*



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I didn't grow up going to church at all, so the Anglican Book of Common Prayer of 1662 had no particular magical qualities for me.

The first time I led a service of Holy Communion from its pages, I stumbled over the phrasing, and grew tired of the sound of my own voice. However I couldn't ignore the ways in which parishioners on that day engaged with resonances of the prayers, enjoyed the emotional and spiritual journey on which we were led, and felt secure in their worship. There were distinct liturgical features flagging the beginning, middle and end of the service, after which we were inevitably sent on our way into the world, confident in the God who had led us purposefully that morning. We were connected powerfully with the story of Christ's career as it was played out that day in the church's calendar. I could see how a generation raised to value predictable progress was at home here.



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My first experiences of Christian worship as a teenage convert some years earlier had been very different. When I first started attending church, I was impressed by the youth's enthusiasm for the regular Sunday evening gospel service. The message preached each week was clear, powerful, and convicting, and the patience of the elders for our youthful, exuberant ways was itself a testimony to Christian love. Friends from university came to celebrate my baptism with me, which became an important marker of my

ownership of the faith. My first sermon was preached at that Brethren Assembly, as I expounded the dynamic providence which led from the union of Ruth and Boaz to the Messiah's birth. Apart from song choice or perhaps a testimony, services had a similar structure each week, with the sermon, right at the end of our time together, calling on those not yet saved to place their trust in Christ. Many did.

These two ways to worship have powerfully impacted my expectations of church life, and have now created a tension in my own experience of how best to conceive theologically our weekly gathering as Christians to worship. Such a personal tension is reflected in a larger conversation amongst Australian Christians about the future of worship.

those responsible for constructing the weekly worship service might best reach this goal.

In a world of aggressive marketing, how we conceive worship is increasingly critical. At best, we have ninety minutes in which to instruct and form members of the congregation. If they only turn up three weeks out of four, our task is rendered that much more difficult. I figure that the average church attendee spends more time watching ads on television each week than engaging in corporate worship. We must think hard about *how best to undo* the things unconsciously learnt in the week and throughout our life, as well as *what we ought to do* for edification when we gather. The ministry of the Word must be the primary occasion for edification and motivation, but additionally we must make sure that the design of the whole pedagogical package is at the service of corporate praise and growth in godliness and maturity. Of the two types of service which have been part of my journey, both had a shape, though the question is raised whether those actively creating the structure, or those receiving more passively the structure which was presented, knew the strengths and weaknesses of the design adopted. We need theological criteria to evaluate these models.

### Theology helps us navigate: The tension between tradition and populism

Worship is too important to reduce to what once worked, or alternatively, what is now drawing the crowds. Worship is generated by a theological vision of God, and so it is to theology that we must turn to set the agenda, to constrain our expectations, and to help us as pilgrims arrive at our heavenly destination. It is reflection on the Scriptures and Christian history which gives us the map to survey the path and correct the course, and makes available to us the criteria by

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which to adopt or reject features of both more formal liturgical worship and more contemporary pragmatic styles. Authoritative texts like the Anglican Prayer Book encapsulate the worship aspirations of English-speaking Christians in the sixteenth century, from which we have much to learn, but surely their structure which shapes our gospel assurance can be reapportioned today in missiologically appropriate ways?

Contemporaries demand that due attention is given to our responsibility,

through church services, to reach out to unbelievers and to connect with local needs and concerns, with little thought given to forms which have stood the test of time, or to acknowledging our communion with saints past, but it is often overlooked that many in our world hunger for an experience of the transcendent which elements of traditional liturgy provide. Just as the American constitution draws upon the political insights of an elite of eighteenth century men, and defends the democratic insights of all voters to elect their representatives, so we must find a

model which honours the formulations of a particular age, and encourages contemporary contributions and insights and experience.

Our weekly experience of worship is a profoundly theological exercise. In describing church, Vanhooser reminds us that we come together to do theology, though in a form that is more informal, participatory, and musical than it is systematic.<sup>2</sup> Our theology teaches us how to select songs, how to intercede for the world, how to approach the Lord's Supper, or how to listen to a preacher, and these in turn reinforce how we should believe: the old principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing) still rings true. We need to bear in mind as well that church, when theologically understood, will separate us from our community, which does not apply theological categories for its self-understanding. If the gospel doesn't just convert individuals but also creates churches, then our churches and their shop-front worship will stand in a relationship of tension with prevailing cultural norms. As a friend recently pointed out, some Christians are more comfortable building a Sunday service around Mother's Day than Pentecost—

not to say that mothers ought not to be

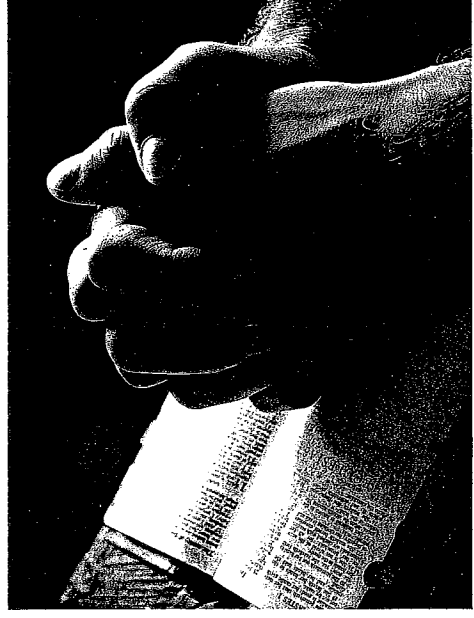


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celebrated annually, but the same can surely be said of the Holy Spirit! Theological meetings are easily lost.

### Theology helps us evaluate: Does the work of the Trinity figure in our liturgy?

There is a future for the discipline of deep theological reflection about the nature of the church: "The purpose of theology and worship alike is to cultivate the vision of who God is and what God has done".<sup>3</sup> At its heart, we gather weekly in worship to celebrate our union with God. Sadly, the most overlooked feature of our common life is our participation in the life of the Triune God. The most

higher quality than any local pastor can provide. In this, the most basic lesson has gone missing: church, even its preaching, is not about *me*, but about *us with God*. Celebrating meeting together in the name of the Lord Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, and for the glory of the Father, has communion with God as its deep foundational truth. Finishing a service with the words of the grace, whether we have celebrated the Lord's Supper or not, reflects and anchors this fundamental liturgical insight.

Oneness underscores the practice of praying the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father") or reciting the Creed ("I believe"). Hearing corporate prayer or praise articulated in unison speaks to me of discipline, organisation and strength.



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fundamental truth in Christian spirituality is that we are *in Christ*. As members of his body, we are together joined to the head. Incorporation into Christ describes who we are, and profoundly shapes what we do. We can pray at home, download sermons on the move, or sing songs of praise in the car. What we cannot do alone is experience the unity of our diversity *when we pray, listen or sing*. I have recently heard it said on a number of occasions that church doesn't seem to have a point any more when downloaded sermons are of

The added advantage of praise supported by music is that not only can we lift our voices as one, but through harmonies and the contribution of a selection of instruments, we reinforce our oneness despite our variety (Ps 150). Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), during the First Great Awakening, became a musical innovator by allowing the singing of hymns by Isaac Watts in Sunday services alongside metrical psalms. He recognised that poorly executed psalmody was detrimental to the experience of oneness, whereas excellently executed hymnody

contributed movingly to the experience of unity which he prayed that the Spirit would bring. Let this be a warning to churches where the tempo of hymn-singing today is a war between organist and congregation, or to contemporary worship leaders, who choose songs that are easily performed as solo but are ill-suited to congregational singing, or who put hands together which contain no melody instruments to guide our voices. Music is deeply woven into postmodern culture, as it gives us an aesthetic connection to transcendence, but more the pity when we fail to recognise the value not just of the words we sing, but of the theological function which corporate praise contributes to our experience of unity. Neither, when we are by ourselves, can we participate in baptism or the Lord's Supper. These are essentially corporate events. Physically, it takes one person to perform and another to receive. But beyond the basic mechanics, their meaning is fundamentally communal. Through the waters of baptism, we identify with the death and resurrection of Christ, and own our union with him (Rom 6), and with other members of the body. We enter the church. Through the bread and wine, we declare our allegiance to Christ, yet more significantly we receive reassurance of the truth of our union with him by taking into our body in physical ways food and drink. In the language of Paul, we participate, or *fellowship with God* and not with demons (1 Cor 10:1-4-22). Such is the seriousness of the encounter, that we have to pay special attention to the believers around us before we eat and drink (1 Cor 11:17-34).

Many Christians have become much too squeamish about the great gift that the sacraments are to those who believe. The Spirit subjectively testifies to assurance within, but God has been super-generous in granting external and objective assurances of union with him as well, namely ministers and sacraments. Of course, it is important to provide welcome to non-Christians in church services. In the end, however, church is

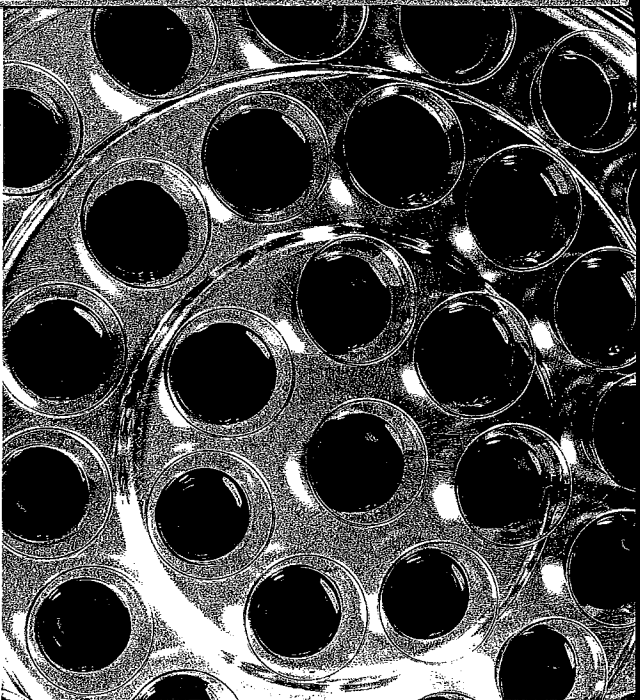


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for Christians, and baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two ordinances commanded by the Lord Jesus himself, ought not to be neglected, or framed merely as opportunities to spend some time thinking about Christ's death. They are moments to celebrate union with our living head. Of all the things we do in worship, these two most powerfully demonstrate one essential theological rationale for our worship: *Just as we are one body...*

Furthermore, Christian oneness comes as a result of the Trinity's initiatives of friendship, when God extends his hand of fellowship to the world and offers access to his promises, presence and purpose. The objective promises of God to



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the church highlight his covenant with us, that he wants to be our God, as we gather at his behest and in his name. We hear the Scriptures read and the sermon preached, or participate in the sacraments as signs that God is making to us an offer, which is real and generous and free. *The model of formal liturgy inherited from the sixteenth century valorises gradual growth and deep connections with Christians from ages past.*

part of a variegated worldwide movement, bringing concerns about the community or our work into church and being sent out to engage with the world as we find it, teach that the church is the pilot project for the world to come (Eph 1:22-23), and a precious gift to the world even now. We are distinct from the world, yet delegated to build a bridge. The Christian church and its worship 'can transmit a vision of reality which helps decisively in the interpretation of life and the world',<sup>4</sup> and provides insights for believers into the divine mission. We may use set forms, at least from time to time, but the dynamism of God's work in the world must not thereby be lost. Perhaps today we are rediscovering not just the great riches that worship services embody, but the multifaceted glories of the church itself, in which Christ is to be found (Eph 3:21). Our worship points us to the meaning of the church.

### The future of worship: More erosion than pick-axes

While many Christians in Australia debate the nature of weekly worship and how to create services of theological integrity and missiological openness, the fact that any kind of church exists

We believe as well that the promise of God secures the *presence of God* as he comes to dwell with us, and does all that is needed to make that closeness possible for sinners in the face of his holiness, through the atoning death of Christ and the regenerating power of the Spirit. Confession of sin is vital, experiential faith is valid, and growth in holiness is to be cultivated, when Christians continued to meet and to spur each other on to love and good deeds. We must finally ensure that our regular gatherings give due prominence to the *purposes of God*. A sense of being

of learning, for example, the discipline of interceding. John Wesley expected that those miners joining his parish church small group programme known as Methodism would still attend services on Sunday in an Anglican parish church and take Communion there. This model assumes that human beings learn and grow through repetition of forms and recitation of stories handed down from wiser minds in the Christian past—as if we were rocks being smoothed by erosive forces.

More recently, weekly liturgy in the revivalist model has prized efforts to gather the unconverted, bold expression of emotion, challenges to a sluggish will through preaching, work for deep and instantaneous transformation, and adventurous responses to contemporary culture, giving a higher profile to the work of the clergy which has marginalised both lay participation and worship as a work of the people (the literal meaning of *liturgy*). Revivalists like Charles Finney (1792-1875) during the Second Great Awakening in the nineteenth century created a brave new world of theological reductionism, which expected God's immediate confrontation with individuals, and grew impatient with material means like water, bread or wine,

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defended in liturgical formulation.<sup>6</sup> In this model, stubborn rebellion had to be confronted by God's dramatic and perceptible intervention now—suggesting that we are more like rocks being hewn with the aid of a pick-axe. Erosive liturgical forces are not sufficient to meet the challenges of a nominal Christian world. There was some push-back:

Charles Hodge at Princeton (1797-1878), a conservative Presbyterian, took umbrage at the revivalist strain. Nevertheless, the urgent need of evangelisation brought out the pragmatic strain in many leaders of liturgy.

Both pedagogies have merit. The fastest growing Christian movement in the world today is Pentecostalism, which draws on Methodist and Baptist expressions of minimalist liturgy, and is increasingly seen as the champion of the future of worship. Indeed, the informality of such services in the pursuit of evangelistic winsomeness is laudable. However, guests in a more liturgically formed church service might still fall down and cry out, 'Surely God is amongst you,' even where these liturgical traditions are not immediately valued. Patient instruction can be an

effective means of winning men and women to Christ even if it appears less instantly powerful. There is also a reaction to the theological superficiality of many traditions with a return to ancient forms of worship<sup>7</sup> or to a more nurturing vision of church as our mother, as Calvin (appealing to Cyprian) would suggest.<sup>8</sup>

In the end, I want to ask for some caution in giving in to the revivalist end of the spectrum too quickly or without adequate theological reflection. The more traditional forms might yet serve us well, even if experimentation and

adaptation are required. The fruit that they can bear might be harvested in a later season, but better than than picking the fruit before it is ripe. Weekly worship ought to be a whole body workout, toning all the spiritual muscles and providing training for the sometimes arduous journey home. With increasing biblical and theological ignorance, now is not the time to lose our nerve, and to sacrifice serious theological commitments for the sake of knee-jerk evangelistic desperation. Our theological body image is at stake. ©

#### END NOTES

1. These liturgical options are funded by two kinds of play: see William B. Evans, 'A Tale of Two Histories: Nurture and Conversion in American Christianity', *Reformation and Revival Journal*, Vol.13/1 (2004), pp61-75.
2. Kevin J. Ventresca, 'Worship at the Well: From Dogmatics to Doology' (end Back-Again!), *Trinity Journal*, Vol.23 (2002), p4.
3. Ventresca, *op. cit.*, p20.
4. Geoffrey Weinwright, *Doology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (London: Epworth Press, 1980), p2.
5. See Doug Adams, *Meeting House to Camp Meeting: Toward a History of American Free Church Worship from 1620 to 1835* (Sarasota: Modern Liturgy Resource Publications, 1981) for discussion of the impact of Finney's New Measures, and William T. Caveauagh, 'The Church as God's Body Language', *Zadok Perspectives: Zadok Papers*, 3:149 (2006), p12, for explanation of the etymology of liturgy.
6. Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Malt: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture* (New York: Church Publishing, 2003), pp66-69.
7. Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).
8. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV/1/4v.



PHOTO: ILLUSTRATION BY GUY LAWRENCE FOR THEOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF THE BIBLE

## TO CHANGE THE WORLD

REVIEWED BY TREVOR GARNEY

power of great ideas alone, but as these ideas meet elite networks and institutions, penetrate them and then spread their influence through new institutions and networks of influence. Wilberforce, Churchill, Martin Luther King, Mandela and others did not change the world by simply holding to the right values. At every point of significant cultural change there is 'rich patronage' that resources intellectuals and educators who within their networks 'imagine, theorize and propagate an alternative culture' (p5). Overlapping networks of leaders and resources come together and give a critical mass to the ideals, practices and goods of an alternative culture.

Hunter is at pains to stress that while evangelism and social reform are right priorities for the church, the working theory of culture on which they are based is flawed. Churches and individuals

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pursue right agendas to make Christ known in word and deed, but they often do this from a position of isolation on the periphery. His stress on networks, and in particular the penetration of elite networks, seems timely to me as I observe many Christians fleeing the professions, schools and universities to train for full-time ministry. Significant cultural change requires some Christians to be operating at the centre of elite networks, not in enclaves. We are also reminded, helpfully, that at key moments in history new institutions are created that give form and expression to the emerging culture, such as those created during the conversion of Barbarian Europe, and later in the Reformation.

Hunter begins by critiquing the assumptions that have driven Christian public engagement and action. The essence of culture, he argues, is not found simply in the 'hearts and minds of individuals', that is, in what are called 'values' (p6). This fails to take into account the factors that give cultures strength and resilience over time. Change does not occur through the

Hunter identifies three common 'paradigms of engagement' with culture and the world:

- 'Defensive Against' – the major objective is the retention of Christian orthodoxies and conduct against the world, and the establishment of Christian institutions of all types to ward off the forces of pluralism, secularisation and change.
- 'Relevance To' – prioritises being relevant and connected to the issues of the day; being in touch and meeting the 'felt-needs' of church attendees, especially non-believers.
- 'Purity From' – motivated by a desire to uphold historical truths (like 'Defensive Against'), but goes further and concludes that there is little to be done for the world in its fallen state. The central task is to extricate itself from the forces of the world and enable authentic witness.

While acknowledging these major paradigms are not without biblical justification, Hunter argues that ultimately they fail to effect major cultural change and make a difference for the Kingdom of God.

Drawing on real-life examples, and careful historical and cultural analysis, he suggests an alternative way for Christians to spend their lives for God and engage with the world, which he calls 'faithful presence':

...where and to the extent that we are able, faithful presence commits us to do what we can to create conditions in the structures of social life we inhabit that are conducive to the flourishing of all. (p247)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 35.

