
Transforming Worship

Peter Leithart

It is a fundamental truth of Scripture that we become like whatever or whomever we worship. When Israel worshipped the gods of the nations, she became like the nations – bloodthirsty, oppressive, full of deceit and violence (cf. Jeremiah 7). Romans 1 confirms this principle by showing how idolaters are delivered over to sexual deviations and eventually to social and moral chaos. The same dynamic is at work today. Muslims worship Allah, a power rather than a person, and their politics reflects this commitment. Western humanists worship man, with the result that every degrading whim of the human heart is honoured and exalted and disseminated through the organs of mass media. Along these lines, Psalm 115:4-8 throws brilliant light on Old Covenant history and the significance of Jesus’ ministry. After describing idols as figures that have every organ of sense but no sense, the Psalmist writes, “Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.” By worshipping idols, human beings become speechless, blind, deaf, unfeeling, and crippled – but then these are precisely the afflictions that Jesus, in the Gospels, came to heal!

It is equally a fundamental truth of Scripture that we are *how* we worship. The kind of worship the church engages in shapes the kind of community she becomes and forms the character of individuals who make up the community. This was one of the great insights of the Reformation, for the Reformers were not contesting outright idolatry but wrong worship of the true God. They were struggling not about *who* was worshipped, for all agreed on that question; they gave their lives to a struggle about *how* Christians are to worship.

Worship, the Reformers insisted, had to be pure in order to be pleasing to God, and by “pure” worship they meant, first, worship that conformed to Scripture and, second, worship that arose from a genuine devotion to the Lord. The Reformers, on both of these crucial points, were absolutely right. There is no place in Christian worship for prayers addressed to Mary or to saints, and no place for veneration of icons, statues, altars, or bread and wine. The Eucharist is not a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ, and it was a travesty of the gospel for the medieval church to withhold the bread and wine of the Supper from the people of God. Worship should not be conducted in an unknown language, and biblical instruction is an essential part of worship. The Reformers quite appropriately directed much of their attention to perversions of biblical worship, so much so that the Swiss Reformation at least was as much about iconoclasm as about justification by faith.

I could write an entire article in the vein of the preceding paragraph, denouncing the errors of Rome and Constantinople or the excesses of charismatics, and perhaps many readers would heartily concur. To do that, however, would neither edify nor challenge; for, whatever might pass for teaching in the academy, biblical teaching is invariably *confrontational* (cf. Mat. 5:21-48). Preaching to the choir does not produce saints, only fanatically self-righteous choristers. So, in this article, I assume that all my readers agree with the Reformers on the issues I have raised above. And yet, surprisingly, I still

have more to say – surprising because much evangelical thinking about worship begins and ends with the question of purity, so that evangelical worship is defined almost completely in opposition to medieval Roman Catholicism. Evangelical worship is defined by what we *do not* allow in worship. Of course, we need to expose error, but once we have rejected unbiblical elements in worship, most of what needs to be said about worship remains to be said. It is not enough to purge worship of impurities; a house-cleaning, essential as it is, does not make a home. Even demons find a well-swept house inviting.

There are thus two points here. First, I want my observations to hit close to home. In this case, the home I want to hit close to is my own, for my main target is non-Anglican evangelicalism, which is, ecclesiastically, where I live. Second, I am not satisfied with discussing what we are to avoid but want to concentrate my attention on investigating what we are to *do* in worship.

What is worship?

I begin with the fundamental question, what is worship? And I begin with this initial answer, *worship is an act not an attitude*. The vocabulary of worship in the Bible emphasises this, for the biblical words are all active, with literal meanings like “bow down” and “serve”. One of the Hebrew words used for worship is *abad* (“serve,” Exodus 3:12), and, significantly, this word is not just used for the service that we perform in worship but more generally for “labour.” Hence, Adam was placed in the garden in order to *abad* the garden, to dress, care for, and cultivate it (Gen. 2:15). When this same word is used for worship, it implies that worship is labour or work. Indeed, historically, worship has been described as the chief *work* of the church.

This point is confirmed when we look at the descriptions of worship in the Bible. There we find worshippers involved in the activity of worship. When an Israelite worshipper brought an animal for sacrifice to the tabernacle or temple, he did not simply give the animal to the priest and sit back and watch. Rather, the worshipper had to lay hands on the animal, probably confessing his sins or giving praise to God in doing so, and then had to kill the animal. Only at that moment, with the manipulation of blood, did the priest become actively involved. Up to that point, it was the Israelite worshipper who was doing all the work (cf. Leviticus 1-7). In the New Testament the same point holds. Descriptions of worship in Acts show Christians praying, singing, breaking bread together. In the heavenly service of Revelation, the elders and the creatures bow down before the Lamb who sits upon the throne (Revelation 4-5). As the Lord’s Prayer says, we hope for God’s will to be done on earth as in heaven, and this must at least mean that we want our worship to be like the worship of cherubim and seraphim.

This fundamental point must be stressed for a couple of reasons. For non-conformist evangelicals, worship is more often associated with an attitude of mind than an action. We tend to think that New Testament “spiritual” worship means “mental” worship, worship that takes place, primarily at least, in our hearts and minds. In some traditions, “spiritual” worship means sitting in silent contemplation, and even evangelicals outside these traditions look with some admiration at the pure spirituality of quietist worship. The Bible, however, presents a different picture. Spiritual worship is worship through the Holy Spirit poured out upon us and, when the Spirit comes, he

makes an enormous racket: a rushing mighty wind, flames of fire, tongues loosed in praise and edification (Acts 2). On this point at least, the Toronto Blessing is closer to Scripture than the Quakers.

It is essential to emphasise, in season and out, that going through a series of actions when our hearts are far from the Lord is abominable to him. But this was also true in the Old Testament and there the Lord gave detailed directions about how people were to act in worship and acted swiftly against those who sinned (Lev. 10:1-7; 1 Sam. 2). To say that a right heart is essential to genuine worship does mean that a right heart is *all* that is essential.

God made us as physical beings and that, the Lord himself declared, is a good thing. It is so good for us to have bodies that we will have bodies forever. There is no biblical reason whatsoever for being ashamed of having a body, for thinking that our bodiliness is somehow a detriment to communion with God, or for feeling that, to be close to God, we have to shed our bodies or at least pretend they are not there. Less bodily worship is not more pleasing to God than more bodily worship and Paul says that our true spiritual worship involves offering our bodies (Rom. 6; 12:1-2). In fact, it is perfectly impossible for us to worship without using our bodies. Even if we sit and contemplate, we are still using our brains to do so, and if we sing, we are using our tongues and jaws and vocal chords and lungs. What reason do we have for stopping short of using the rest of our bodies in worship? Why are we willing to offer the Lord “brain worship” and “tongue worship” but hesitant to offer “hand worship” or “feet worship”? Why don’t we clap our hands (Ps. 47:1)? Why don’t we bend our knees to do homage before our Lord and Maker? Why don’t we lift our hands, especially in view of the fact that lifting up hands is virtually synonymous with prayer? (cf. 1 Tim. 2:8). What does it say about us that we offer only certain parts of our bodies to the Lord?

Evangelicals tend to talk about “bowing the knees of our hearts” or “lifting up hearts”. There is biblical warrant for such expressions but there is at least as much biblical warrant for acting out these attitudes in our bodies. Because of the way God made us, bodily posture is inseparable from the “posture” of our minds and hearts. If we were to meet the Queen and refused to go through the customary gestures of respect, it would show something about us – either that we are ignorant Americans who haven’t a clue what to do around real royalty or that we do not have any respect for the Queen. In Scripture, God’s people fall on their faces in fear when they come into God’s presence (e.g., Rev. 1:17). If we come before the Lord in worship and refuse to bow in his presence, refuse to bend the knee as a sign of our humility before him, and refuse to stand at attention when his word is read, what does that say about our respect for him? Does it perhaps say that we really do not think he is with us?

There is a pastoral concern here as well. Exclusive emphasis on “inner attitude” and “worship with the mind” is intensely demanding, requiring enormous mental discipline. Add to this the fact that many are easily distracted anyway. Given this difficulty, and given the fact that worship is virtually defined as “mental activity,” we feel guilty when we are distracted and our minds wander. If worship is an internal attitude, then a distracted worshipper is a contradiction in terms. If we find our minds drifting during a worship service, we chastise ourselves for our lack of spirituality. The problem, as I see it, is as much in the form of worship as in our sloth, though one should never discount the latter factor. If we worshipped with our bodies, distraction would not be

nearly so much of a problem. We could lose ourselves in worship in the way we lose ourselves – I say it with all reverence – in a game of football or in a dance or in some deeply intriguing hobby. We would be less self-conscious, less focused on forcing ourselves to be attentive, and correspondingly more open to being conscious of God's presence.

The lively, physical worship of the charismatic churches is a salutary correction of evangelical worship in this regard, since charismatics definitely offer their bodies to God in worship. Charismatic worship has a more ambiguous legacy in another respect, for worship is not merely an act but an *act of the whole congregation*. On the one hand, charismatic churches, following the model of 1 Cor. 14, tend to emphasise that each member of the church contributes to worship but, on the other hand, charismatic worship can degenerate into a radically individualistic activity, with each member closed off in his private ecstasy, each doing what is right in his own eyes.

Can we find forms of worship that encourage participation of the whole people but avoid falling into liturgical anarchism? Here, the Reformers have much to teach. One of the great, and often ignored, contributions of the Reformation was to return worship to the people. Somehow, many Protestants have got the idea that prayer books, with written prayers, responsive readings, creeds and the like are Roman Catholic and medieval. Nothing could be further from the truth. Prayer books were a product of the Reformation and they were written so that the congregation could participate fully in the act of worship. In the early church worship was an act of the whole church but during the medieval period the participation of the laity was reduced to a minimum. The Mass was conducted in Latin which, in the main, only the clergy understood. The priest stood with his back to the congregation throughout the celebration of the Eucharist, and the words, even if they could be understood, could barely be heard. In general, a layman in the high middle ages received communion only once or a few times a year – exploding the myth that frequent communion is medieval and Roman Catholic. Beyond that, the church member was less worshipper than spectator, watching the priest do his thing and especially watching the priest raise the host for him to adore. The vast majority of masses during the high middle ages were performed privately by a few priests, without any laymen even spectating.

The Reformers set out to change that and strove to return to a biblical pattern of worship, involving the whole congregation. In the Bible, the worship was in a language that could be understood and, when the readings were in an unknown language, it was translated and explained. In Nehemiah we find the whole people standing together, bowing down as "one man" and lifting up their hands in unison (Neh. 8:5-6). The feasts of the Old Testament and the Supper in the New were meals for the whole church, every baptised member.

I can only reflect on limited experience in England but the following observations have been confirmed by friends of wider experience. Nearly every non-Anglican evangelical church I have worshipped in uses a form more akin to medieval Catholic worship than to Reformation worship. True, worship is conducted in the vernacular and when the Supper is served it is served to every communing member. In other ways, however, much of evangelical worship is pure medievalism, with active clergy and passive congregation. The congregation does not bow or raise its hands; the people never pray audibly, rarely if ever saying the Lord's Prayer; the congregation frequently

does not say a creed; there are no responsive readings of the Psalms or corporate readings of other portions of Scripture. On most Sundays, the congregation watches, listens, and the only active participation is singing a few hymns. Apart from singing, the only voice that is heard is the minister's. By contrast, Calvin wanted to include sung creeds and the Lord's prayer, included at least a reading of the Ten Commandments, and supported weekly celebration of the Supper. The typical evangelical service is *not* Reformation worship; it is in important respects closer to the medieval abuses that the Reformers spent themselves to change. Reforming worship demands an end to the clericalisation of evangelical worship and a new emphasis on congregational participation.

In a broad sense, all of the Christian life is worship, a self-offering to God, but the worship of the Lord's Day is a specific kind of act, an *act of the church by which God renews his covenant with her*. The church is the people of God, bound to him by the bond of friendship and love which the Bible calls covenant. But the church is a covenant people full of sinners. Every week individually and corporately we fall short of the kind of people we are supposed to be, and so, once a week in a public, formal, visible way, God gathers us to renew covenant with us.

There are several key moments or stages in covenant renewals. First, God calls us and gathers us, by issuing an invitation and command through his minister. The call to worship is an important part of worship because it means that gathering together is not just a bright idea cooked up by the church leaders. On the contrary, the Lord himself calls us to gather and commands us to assemble in his presence to renew covenant with him, from which we can conclude that it is a serious sin to neglect worship. If you were invited by the Queen or the Prime Minister to a state dinner, but refused to come because of a minor inconvenience, it would be a great insult. What is the fate of those who refuse the invitation of the King of kings?

As soon as we are in God's presence, we realise, as Isaiah did, that we are unclean sinners who need to be cleansed and forgiven, and so the first thing we do after gathering is to confess our sins. The Lord promises that if we confess our sins he will forgive and cleanse us (1 John 1:9). Confession should be an act of the whole church and this, to my thinking, is best carried out by written prayers of confession, said in unison by the whole body of the church. At least, the minister should pray a confession at the beginning of the service. When we have confessed our sins, we crave assurance that the Lord has heard and will forgive, and so the minister, acting in God's name, announces that we are forgiven, by repeating an appropriate promise from Scripture.

Forgiveness, however, is not the end of the Christian life, nor the end of worship. Living in covenant with God is not merely a matter of having our sins forgiven but is all about how we live as a forgiven people. So, the next moment in the worship service is the Word, including reading, corporate recitation of portions of Scripture, as well as preaching. In various ways we assent to the word we have heard. We say "Amen" to the reading, indicating not only that we believe it but that we will live by it; we offer ourselves to God when we offer our tithes and offerings, which means that presenting offerings is an act of worship that is best included in the worship service; and we offer ourselves to God in praise.

Having cleansed and instructed us, the Lord invites us to share a meal at his table. The Supper is the seal of the covenant, the assurance that our confession has been

heard, our sins forgiven, our Amen accepted, and that God has renewed covenant with a sinful people. In the Bible, covenants are often made when two people are at enmity with one another. The common meal is the seal of the covenant because it shows that former enemies have become friends, partners at the table, sharing the same bread. If worship is covenant renewal, then there is no reason not to celebrate the covenant meal every time we gather for worship. Biblically, it is virtually unthinkable to make a covenant without a meal. To those who think that weekly celebration of the Supper will demean and diminish it, I can only assert, having served for a number of years in a church that practised weekly communion, that it is simply not true. And if we really believed that infrequency makes the heart grow fonder, we would not have weekly sermons, and pastors would instruct new husbands to kiss their wives “at least quarterly.”

The covenant is renewed; we have confessed our faults; God has instructed us; he has sealed the covenant by offering us the bread of heaven and a feast of wine. But we cannot stay forever. Worship is the chief work of the church but it is not the only work. We serve God in worship on the Lord’s day, and then the Lord sends us into the world to serve him in our various callings. So, the last act of the covenant renewal is a dismissal. The word “Mass” has come into disrepute because of its associations with false Roman Catholic teaching about the nature of the Eucharist, but in its origins the word “Mass” is a perfectly good word to describe worship. It comes from the final words of the Latin Mass – *Ita, missa es* – and it means “You are sent out.” When we call the worship service a “mass” we are saying that the whole point of the service is to lead up to this final moment. Renewal of the covenant that prepares us to depart from the place of worship to the world of labour.

What difference does it make?

Earlier I noted that the Hebrew word *abad* is used both for worship and for labour. The same connection is found in the English words “cult” and “culture.” This points to the fact that the kind of worship we engage in will shape the kind of culture we have. This is not the primary purpose of worship. Worship is primarily for the honour and glory of our Lord. Yet, worship also has effects on the people who worship, so that it is fair to ask what specific difference it would make if the church were to adopt the forms of worship I have outlined above: communal participation in prayer, singing or reciting of creeds and the Ten Commandments, corporate readings of Scripture, weekly celebration of the Supper, all set within the order of covenant renewal.

Answering this question in a complete way is literally impossible. Our interactions with other human beings are too complex to comprehend. Who can tell in detail what effect a slight shift in the tone of voice, the wrong word, an ill-considered gesture can have on our relations with one another? What parent can know what long-term effect a harsh answer will have on the character and soul of his child? And if our relations with other creatures and the effects of those relations are so complex, how can we hope to explain fully our relations with the Creator? And, if what I have said so far is biblical, then we should do it, whether or not we know what the consequences will be. For these reasons, only the beginnings of an answer to the question can be offered here, all offered on the assumption that there will always be more to say on this subject.

So, what difference does our “cult,” our worship, make in the way we live together,

in our “cultural” life? One of the fundamental realities of culture is language. We can distinguish national cultures on the basis of the language they speak and, even within the same grammatical language, what we call “subcultures” are defined by differences in language. The military, for example, is a subculture with its own dialect. There are significant differences between American and British English, in vocabulary, vocal intonations, accent, spelling. As Christians, we want our language, the way we speak and think about the world, to be based on the Bible. We want to learn to speak “Christianly.” If the Christian “cult” is supposed to have some effect on culture, it should produce people who, as one writer has said, “talk funny.” From this perspective, *worship is language class*.

This has some implications for what happens in worship. One of the bugbears of evangelical thinking on worship is “dry rote”, opposition to which is a primary reason why many reject “ritualistic” worship as sub-Christian. I am of the opinion that we need a great deal *more* “dry rote” in worship. If Christian cult is supposed to form culture, and if language is a fundamental dimension of culture, then Christian worship should affect the language that we use. And it does. But if we are to learn to speak “Christian” with any fluency, we need more than instruction. One cannot learn a language well by listening to the teacher. You have to practice the language, repeating the same things over and over again until it becomes second nature. The traditional way of teaching Latin – *amo, amas, amat* and so on – is, despite all modern innovations, still the best way to do it. The same is true if we want to speak Bible. We need to be drilled. We need “dry rote”.

Practically, this means that worship should include the corporate reading of Scripture, corporate prayers drawn from Scripture, and corporate recitation of creeds that are based on Scripture. Especially, it means corporate reading, singing and chanting of the Psalms. For centuries, Psalms was the prayer book of the church, and monks at least chanted through the entire Psalter each week. Among English evangelicals, the Psalms are today virtually unknown in public worship, and our worship and prayer life is profoundly impoverished as a result. If we want to learn the language of prayer, if we want to have ready biblical ways of expressing our griefs, our afflictions, our exultations and triumphs, we need to be drilled – not merely instructed – in the language of the Psalms.

Another fundamental element of culture is *story*. Cultures are defined by the stories they share, the memories they keep alive. In Deuteronomy, Moses constantly exhorts the people to remember what the Lord had done in Egypt, not to encourage nostalgia but to motivate God’s people for action in the present. By recalling the mighty works of God in Egypt, Israel would be bold to enter the land and expect the Lord to perform similar wonders against the Canaanites. Israel was defined as a people by the stories they remembered and told, stories of Passover and Exodus, and these stories gave shape to their future as well. The same is true for culture generally. If Christian cult is intended to form culture, then it must involve remembrance of the story that defines who we are. From this perspective, *worship is history class*.

Of course, this implies reading and teaching and preaching the gospel and the whole of biblical history. Learning the Christian story also means being drilled in the Christian story as we are in Christian language. Again, the story becomes part of us, and we become part of it, as we recite it. Practically, this can be done by using creeds

in worship, some of which, the Apostles' and the Nicene for example, are just summaries of Christian history. If we want a biblical view of history to form us as we minister in the world, one way to start is by making these creeds our own.

Finally, culture is in large part a matter of common patterns of interaction among people. One culture differs from another in their greeting gestures, in the ways they express companionship or contempt for one another, and so on. I am told that it is quite normal for heterosexual men in Africa to hold hands in public, but such a gesture of affection would have an entirely different significance in San Francisco or Cambridge or certain parts of London. These differences are not just a matter of etiquette, for manners and morals are inseparably connected. If Christian cult forms culture, it should shape the way we conduct ourselves toward one another. From this perspective, *worship is training in the virtues of Christian community.*

I have in mind here particularly the Lord's Supper. At the Supper, the church shows publicly, in a ritual form, the kind of people we are, and by celebrating the Supper, we are reminded of our calling and constantly challenged to live up to it. A number of aspects of the Supper are relevant here. First, the Supper is a communal meal, not an individual affair. As we share the meal, we are continually reminded that we are not alone; rather, our communion with the Father through Jesus Christ also involves communion with others. A church that celebrates the Supper will challenge the extreme individualism that dominates our culture. Second, the Supper is also a memorial of Jesus' self-sacrificial death. As we share in this meal, we are being constantly reminded not only of what Jesus has accomplished but also of our duty to follow his example of humility. The Supper thus forms a church that opposes our culture's intoxication with self-fulfilment. Third, the Supper is a meal in which we commune with our heavenly Lord through the Spirit. That we commune with him through the physical elements of bread and wine has been a problem for some Christians, but it highlights the goodness of the creation, and points to the fact that the whole creation is designed to be used as a means of fellowship with him. A church trained by the Supper will be a church living constantly – whether we eat or drink or whatever we do – practising the presence of God.

Conclusion

Worldliness is the great threat to the contemporary church, all the more dangerous for being so often unrecognised. Worldliness has invaded the church's worship, sometimes reducing it to showmanship and entertainment. In the face of these threats to biblical worship it will not do simply to reassert the forms of traditional evangelical worship, for, as I have argued, evangelical worship is in many ways inconsistent with the patterns of worship we find in Scripture. Instead, evangelical worship must itself be reformed according to the Word of God, and this reformation will help evangelical churches become the force for cultural transformation they are called to be.

For: we become like what we worship and we are shaped by how we worship.

Rev. P J Leithart is a minister of the Presbyterian Church of America currently studying for a doctorate in theology at Cambridge
