
The Worship Downgrade: A critical look at Evangelical backsliding

Nick Needham

One of my favourite theologians is John Williamson Nevin (1803-86), of the German Reformed Church in America. At one period in his life, Nevin immersed himself so deeply in the study of the early Church fathers that he said he became “dizzy” when he tried to connect what he saw in the fathers with what he saw in contemporary Evangelicalism.

Brother Nevin, I know the feeling, especially with regard to the vexed matter of *worship*. When I have been deep in the early Church – Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius and their colleagues – and I then resurface in the late 20th century, I too suffer a Nevin-like dizziness. I become dazed and amazed at the strange sight of what has replaced early Christian worship in these dark days. So let me try to sketch the things that disturb me about modern Evangelical worship, having drunk deeply (but hopefully not become drunk) at the wells of the early Church.

We could look at worship in terms of its *spirit* and its *form*. Let us take spirit first. I am disturbed at the man-centred spirit of much that passes for worship today. The almost universal assumption is that we come to church on the Lord’s day *in order to be blessed* – to be uplifted, refreshed, comforted, taught, or zapped (fill in the appropriate word). In other words, the worship is to minister to *us*. As somebody once put it, church is a theatre, we are the audience, the worship-leader is the actor, and God is the prompter.

On the Charismatic end of the spectrum, this means that “worship” is geared to stimulating and gratifying our felt needs, longings and impulses. We want emotional satisfaction out of our worship. The spotlight is on us; God is there to minister to us, to hug us, kiss us, and make us glow with warm feelings of mystic intimacy. Plainly, worship has become a man-centred activity. And yet are things very different in principle when we go into a more “conservative” non-charismatic service of worship? Here the “worship” revolves around the sermon; everything else are mere “preliminaries” to be got through as quickly as is decently possible. People listen to the sermon to get a blessing out of it – to have an experience of God’s presence through the anointing on the preacher, or to receive intellectual satisfaction through the sermon’s contents.

My problem is that both these approaches to worship are equally and catastrophically man-centred. The Charismatic comes to church in order to have a mind-bypassing Toronto/Pensacola experience; the Puritan comes in order to have a mind-massaging “preaching experience”. But mankind and human experience stand resolutely in the centre in both cases. One man wants to be zapped *out* of his mind with wondrous feelings, the other man wants to be zapped *into* his mind with wondrous preaching. But both varieties stand centre stage, crying like the leech, “Give me!”

This shared disease of Charismatic and Puritan man-centredness has, I surmise, seriously distorted the true spirit of worship. True worship is God-centred. As the same writer quoted a minute ago put it, if church is a theatre, the reality is that we the congregation are the actor, the worship-leader is the prompter, and *God is the audience*. Why do we, the Lord's people, gather before the Lord on His day? Not primarily to be blessed, but to bless Him as our Creator and Redeemer. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name!" (Ps. 103:1). Of course we desire blessing *from* God; but we are most likely to find it when our overarching desire and aim are to bless Him. "Bless" means "speak well of". God speaks well of us when we speak well of Him.

Consider Acts 13:2: "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." The Holy Spirit speaks when the church in Antioch is doing what? Ministering to one another? Being ministered to by the Lord? No, *ministering to the Lord*. "Minister to" is the Greek word "*liturgeo*", from which we get "liturgy". They liturgized to the Lord. They served Him, blessed Him, offered worship to Him – not with any ulterior motive of getting a good feeling out of it, but because the Lord of glory is worthy of such worship. Notice the mention of fasting: here was a ministering to the Lord which involved self-denial, not self-satisfaction. And it was while they were liturgizing to the Lord in this self-denying spirit that the Spirit spoke back. This seems a number of light years away from the man-centred "Bless me, teach me, zap me" ethos of modern worship, whether Charismatic or Puritan.

Or consider again the Lord Jesus Christ's discussion with the Samaritan woman about worship: "The hour is coming and now is when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). The word "worship" here is "*proskuneo*", literally "to kiss towards". The original reference was to a subject kissing the hand of his king as a sign of homage and loyalty. Hence it came to mean "to do obeisance", and hence "to worship". Worshipping the Father in spirit and truth means performing towards him those acts which manifest our homage and loyalty to Him as our King, by which we "kiss his hand", paying Him due honour. Once again a God-centred view of worship confronts us. Why do God's people gather on God's day? To render to Him homage, honour, obeisance and adoration by those actions which are the divine equivalent of kissing a king's hand.

Here, then, is the spirit which ought to govern our worship. How far away this is from our modern preoccupations is painfully evident. Charismatics seek emotional fixes from Spirit-dispensing gurus, and Puritans seek sermonic highs from Spirit-anointed orators, but Scripture preaches the God-centred worship of the true God, the ever-blessed Trinity. This is costly; it demands effort; it is not necessarily emotionally fulfilling or heart-warming in any immediate sense. The greatest worshipper was our great high priest, Jesus Christ, and the greatest act of worship ever offered was His priestly self-offering to God on the altar of the cross. Did that warm Jesus' heart? No, but it warmed the Father's heart – and that is the most basic consideration in worship.

From the spirit of worship let us pass to its *form*. Spirit must be embodied in form, and form in its turn fashions and nurtures spirit. Yet both Charismatic and Puritan worship harbour a deep hatred of form. Each in its own way idolises *spontaneity*. The assumption is that only the spontaneous utterance of the heart can be spiritual and

sincere; therefore form, structure, set pattern and liturgy stifle the Spirit. (This argument, of course, would prevent us from ever singing psalms and hymns, which are pre-composed set prayers to be sung by those who did not write them; but no-one seems to notice this.) Hypnotised by spontaneity, Charismatics tend to want to “go with the flow” of the (alleged) Spirit in a service of worship, which in its extreme variety leads to gatherings where nobody knows what is going to happen next. Who knows how the Spirit will lead? Form and structure are thus placed under the dictatorship of mood and feeling. Indeed, the creation of mood and feeling, the engendering of atmosphere, become the ultimate goal of whatever forms exist; and this atmosphere is then assumed to be the Holy Spirit.

Puritanism suffers from the same defect in a different guise. The adulation of spontaneity leads to the abandonment of liturgy. Since the whole congregation obviously cannot pray spontaneously at the same time without sounding like a tower of Babel, vocal prayer is taken away from the congregation and monopolised by the minister, who prays his own prayers, often long-winded, often flowery, often tedious, during which the mind of the average worshipper wanders half-a-dozen times. There is in Puritan services no collective confession of sin, no collective affirmation of the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed, no collective reciting of the Lord’s Prayer or the Ten Commandments. A passive congregation sits and listens to a Puritan priest carrying out acts of worship on their behalf. Who said the popish Middle Ages were over? They are alive and well and living in the clericalism of Puritan worship.

It may surprise many of us, but the worship-forms of the early Church and the Reformers were resolutely, robustly, resoundingly liturgical. Liturgy means “the work of the people”. Worship is not the work of the minister; it is the *people’s* work. Here is an interesting question: who invented liturgical worship-books for congregational use? Not medieval papists, but Reformation Protestants. Why? To liberate worship from priestly captivity and put it back where it rightly belongs, in the hands and mouths of the people. Liturgy liberates the congregation to take part actively, vocally, together, as the body of Christ, in the worship of the blessed Trinity. Not Tom, Dick and Sally popping up with their own individual contributions (there’s self-serving individualism for you), but the whole people corporately confessing, affirming, reciting, interceding, praising as a congregation of royal priests. As for the minister, he happily ceases to be the “crafter of worship experiences” (an Evangelical blasphemy I recently came across), and becomes instead the servant of the liturgy. As Alexander Vinet put it, “The minister is bound to the liturgy, which belongs not to him, but is the utterance of the congregation, to which he does but lend his own individual voice” (*Pastoral Theology*, p.221).

Protestant backsliding from liturgy, and the renewed medieval captivity of worship to the all-performing minister, must be traced largely to Puritanism, especially its Independent “left wing”. I admire the Puritans as physicians of the individual soul. Yet in a real sense, they so easily became proto-Charismatics in their emphasis on inwardness, emotion, spontaneity, and the “felt presence” in piety and worship. In their case it was wedded to a distrust of the physical as a vehicle for the spiritual. (But what then becomes of baptism, Lord’s Supper, the printed Bible?) As a result, Puritanism set in motion a powerful stream of tendency towards the stripping down of physical worship forms to a bare (almost naked) minimum, that the soul alone might stand before God alone. At times, this Puritan crusade against liturgy could take on quite

ludicrous proportions. The prince of the Puritans, John Owen, manfully disposed of the Lord's Prayer in corporate worship by arguing that Christ gave this prayer before His resurrection, therefore it was essentially an Old Testament prayer not suited to New Testament worship! (See Owen's *Discourse Concerning Liturgies*, in *Works* vol. 15, p. 14). Perhaps we should heroically ditch the whole Sermon on the Mount for the same reason. Was John Owen the unwitting father of Dispensationalism?

Under the dynamic of Puritanism, then, out went the liturgical-congregational worship structures of Luther, Calvin, Anglicanism, and the original Reformation. In came the passive spectator-style worship of Nonconformity: the sermon sandwich, with all its man-centred idolisation of the anointed preacher and the "warmed heart" which his rhetoric engendered in the pew-fodder. By the close of the 17th century, Samuel Wesley (father of John and Charles) tells us that the mere mention of liturgy was enough to make Nonconformists sneer and hurl abuse at their Anglican brethren. "Nothing was more common than to hear the public prayers and established liturgy ridiculed, and the words and expressions therein, as well as the persons officiating, made the constant subject of all the bad jests that could be invented" (*Letter from a Country Divine*, London, 1706, p.4). In so behaving, Puritans and Nonconformists were sneering at the early Church fathers and hurling abuse at the Reformers. Fortunately the continental Reformed Churches were unaffected by this English Puritan downgrade and retained the old Calvinistic liturgical forms.

The Charismatic movement was partly, we may think, a timely reaction against the congregationally passive, minister-dominated, sermon-worshipping degeneration of Protestant worship in the English-speaking Nonconformist world. But Charismatic worship turned out to be based on the same anti-form assumptions as Puritanism. If Puritanism's hyper-spirituality tended to make worship exclusively a matter of mental piety to the exclusion of the body, Charismaticism has often run to seed in a style of worship which is all body to the exclusion of the mind. And so Evangelical worship has polarised between the party of anti-form mental experience and the party of anti-form physical experience: "teach me" versus "zap me". But where is "worship God"? Neither party seems willing to challenge the shared presupposition of experiential romanticism. This is what equally undergirds each side's hostility to the liturgical form which harnesses and empowers the spirit to worship God in harmony with other worshipping spirits.

Yes, brother Nevin, I too feel dizzy. Evangelicalism has sold its theocentric birthright for a man-centred idolatry of feeling and experience, in worship as well as in theology, among Puritans as well as Charismatics. But I do suggest it is high time we went back to the Fathers and the Reformers, that we might be reminded about the nature of true worship, both in its spirit and in its form. "They ministered to the Lord." – "Those who kiss God's hand must kiss His hand in spirit and truth." – "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit." – "And all the people said, Amen!"

Suggested Reading:

Charles W Baird, *A Chapter on Liturgies* (London 1856)

William D Maxwell, *An outline of Christian Worship* (London 1945)

Dr Nick Needham lectures in Church History, Highland Theological Institute, Dingwall
