

The Nature of Christian Worship

Including a consideration of Contemporary and Alternative Worship

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What is Christian worship?

In Christianity worship has to do with giving honour to God, recognising God's worth. The word "worship" comes from the Old English *weorthscipe* meaning acknowledgement of worth. In worship God is adored, honoured, given the recognition and respect God deserves. Worship has to do with communicating and being in relationship with God. It connects with how we conduct our lives.

In Christian understanding God is the one who has taken the initiative and has acted in creation and redemption, supremely so in Jesus Christ. In Christ God's nature and purposes were revealed in an unparalleled way. We respond to God in adoration and to God's provision for us by praise and thanksgiving. Worship is the free co-operative response of the person and community of faith to what God has done and is doing. In worship we are drawn into the presence of God. It is the human response to the divine initiative. Hence it is not so much a reaching out to God as allowing God's Word and Spirit to touch our lives as we acknowledge and open ourselves to God.

The purpose of worship is to praise God for God's grace and glory and to seek God's will and blessing for our lives. In Roman Catholic circles it has been common to describe worship as "the glorification of God and the sanctification of humanity." God is honoured and people are encouraged and built up. The practice of engaging in worship has a role in forming people as followers of Jesus Christ.

Geoffrey Wainwright points out that the scriptural and traditional understanding of Christian worship is that it is "the church's worship of God through Christ in the Spirit (*Doxology*, p.6)." Hence it is communal more than individual, focused on God more than ourselves, occurs through our lord Jesus Christ and is carried out in the Spirit. God reveals God's self through Jesus Christ who is our mediator. We worship God in the Spirit in recognition that it is God's Spirit who draws us to God. Christian worship therefore is consciously Trinitarian.

Worship is not turning aside from life but on the contrary is a matter of taking time to bring our lives and the life of the community consciously before God. John Macquarrie says, "Worship is not a temporary withdrawal from life, but rather the concentration of life, its 'recollection' in the sense of gathering together" (*Principles of Christian Theology* p. 434). This highlights the importance of the prayers of the people in worship.

There is a past, present and future dimension to worship. We recall when God acted clearly in the past, most notably in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. We recognise God as lord in the present and call upon God's Spirit to strengthen and guide us. We anticipate the future fulfilled reign of God and seek to live by it now.

Any Christian worship is meant to enable people to enter into the presence of the living God in order to acknowledge God through Jesus Christ, listen for God's Word,

share in times of prayer, and ask for God's Spirit for our lives and for our involvement in God's mission in the world. Whatever the form of worship the goal is to assist these to take place.

Ordered liberty

The Uniting Church has inherited a particular approach to worship. The article on 'Ordered Liberty' in *Worship for UIW 2* says, "Its heritage is not that of the Prayer Book, closely prescribing the majority of words and actions; neither is our heritage one of freedom without form." Our approach has been named "ordered liberty" which means that our way of worship has great freedom but exercised within a broad framework. In some situations the freedom will be exercised over the framework. In others a more ordered style enables people to be free before God. It is never a matter of order versus no order.

What then is that basic framework? *Uniting in Worship 2* in Service of the Lord's Day 2 says that it is:

- Gathering as God's People;
- Receiving God's Word;
- Celebrating the Lord's Supper;
- Being Sent on God's Mission.

The approach in *Seasons of the Spirit* that links Christian education with worship uses the words: gathering, engaging, responding and blessing. Others use the phrases: we come to God, we wait on God's Word, we respond, we go with God. As can be seen the pattern is the same in each.

If one thinks of inviting people to one's home for a meal these components are evident. First there is the arrival and gathering of the people; hopefully there is good conversation; a meal is shared; and people leave with the good wishes of the hosts. It is important that each phase goes well: the initial welcome, the conversation, the meal time, and the parting. This is a natural structure which applies to worship. It is not an imposition but a framework within which the various elements of worship can be included appropriately. Using this framework there is freedom to focus on God and be flexible in how the worship is developed.

In the Uniting Church the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not always included and monthly is the practice in many churches. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that it is not an extra. Rather, worship without Holy Communion is less than the fullness of worship.

There are core elements for worship and additional elements that are optional. *Uniting in Worship 2* points these out in the rubrics for the various worship services. It may surprise people at how few core elements there are and how much freedom there is in developing a worship service using this primary Uniting Church resource.

Uniting in Worship 2 identifies only the following as core items that should always be included: A call to worship, prayers that include adoration, confession and a declaration of forgiveness, a gospel reading, proclamation of the Word in some form, prayers of the people, blessing and dismissal.

If the Lord's Supper is included then the following are essential: setting the table with an invitation to the Lord's table, a great prayer of thanksgiving that includes the narrative of the institution of the Lord's Supper (if this has not already been recounted) and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the breaking of the bread and the communion.

Even with the core elements there is liberty in relation to how they are performed or expressed or lived out. Creative worship in whatever form or style can make use of drama, video, photography, music, silence, and symbols. Those devising the worship can decide how the space is set up and how people are to be invited to participate

Worship in the Uniting Church

The Uniting Church since its inception has made use of a range of styles of worship. There has been ongoing traditional or standard worship though few worship services have not made some significant changes over time. In the 1970s there were 'Sunday night youth services' using guitars, slide projectors and new expressions of prayers. 'All age worship' was promoted in the 1980s with resources from the Joint Board of Christian Education. In the 1980s Sunday morning worship in many places sought to be 'blended worship' making use of bands with guitars, drums and other instruments. This often led to conflicts over worship especially in relation to music. There was the development of Australian folk songs for worship with songs by Robin Mann, Rod Boucher and others leading the way. Contemporary Australian prayers and liturgies began to be written by Bruce Prewer, Terry Falla, Dorothy McRae-McMahon and others. The growth and development of the charismatic movement has affected worship from the 1970s with many Uniting Church people influenced by John Wimber conferences for example. More recently many Uniting Church people attend the Hillsong conferences.

The ecumenical liturgical movement was influential in the creation of *Uniting in Worship* publications. The use of Taize music and styles of worship since the mid-1980s and the more recent use of Iona and Celtic resources for worship has been significant for many. The Willow Creek Community Church with its 'seeker sensitive' services has impacted many Uniting Churches through various conferences and the provision of resources. Saddleback Community Church has similarly been influential and its resources drawn upon. Recently some congregations are seeking to provide what in the UK are called 'fresh expressions of Church', such as café church. The Uniting Church has become increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse so that worship is now conducted in many languages and forms, from Korean to Pacific Island worship. Special worship events are making use of their contribution to the richness of worship.

Whatever the form of worship, the challenge for those preparing and conducting worship is to develop worship that is authentic, engaging and contextually relevant. While some may err on the side of trying to be too creative such that the worship lacks coherence, on the other hand worship can be bland and lacking in creative and contextual expression.

Given our post Christendom and post modern context worship leaders have to endeavour to provide worship that does connect people with God and with their context, providing inspiration and encouragement to live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

People need to feel that public worship is important and helpful and are assisted to experience the reality of the living God through participation in worship. Worship is meant to convey something of God's mysterious grace and speak to the reality of people's daily lives.

Drawing on the basic structure of worship that has a natural flow and being free to be creative are both important if worship is to engage people in satisfying and helpful ways.

Contemporary and Alternative Worship

When speaking about contemporary worship it helps to recognise that the word "contemporary" simply means belonging to or occurring in the present. So contemporary can refer to a range of worship styles currently practiced from very traditional to experimental, from large charismatic worship to informal worship held in a home, from the typical worship in many churches to the worship conducted in retreat settings. It may be desirable to differentiate "contemporaneous" worship, namely all the types of worship being conducted in the present, from "contemporary" worship which has a more particular reference.

Contemporary worship has at least some of the following elements. It uses music written since the 1960s for the most part. A range of musical instruments are used with bands often leading the music. Singers assist the congregation to sing. There is an increased use of visual projection (congregations have moved on from overhead slides to digital projectors). Elements of the worship are designed for particular age groups or for all ages, rather than focusing on adult worship. Prayers are mostly locally written or extempore, using contemporary Australian voices. Aspects of contemporary mass media may be used (drawing on songs, images and news stories). There is a willingness to vary the furniture set up of worship and change the typical fabric of worship. There is more varied bodily participation (not only singing, receiving Holy Communion and giving an offering). Voices and perspectives other than Anglo or Western adults are fostered.

In contemporary worship people create or draw upon elements of worship (music, songs, prayers, visuals, etc) that come from the present or very recent time. Worship leaders use the news, narratives and idioms of today in their communication and new technology reflecting changing social and cultural patterns of behaviour. The intention is to respond to what the Spirit is doing in the world and in people's lives here and now. While there can be a danger in trying too hard to be up to date and relevant, contemporary worship seeks to assist people to worship in ways that reflect the current context and connect their faith to the realities of daily life. Contemporary worship is very concerned to relate the Christian story and the biblical context to people's stories and the 21st century context.

Contemporary worship leaders do well to recognise that in the desire to be modern and relevant we do people a disservice if we fail to recognise the basic framework of worship and the core items that need to be included. This should not be seen as an imposition but a guideline so that worship is conducted with the best flow and includes the essentials of Christian worship. As stated above there is great freedom in our tradition but that does not mean disregarding the fundamental structure and components of worship. Effective contemporary worship does so without people

necessarily being aware of the structure for the focus is on honouring the living God, seeking God's guidance for our lives, and dedicating ourselves to following Jesus enabled by the Spirit.

Alternative worship describes a broad worship movement that has some important differences from "contemporary worship." The intent of those engaged in alternative worship is to engage with what they see to be post-modernity as the lived experience of many people in their local communities. Emerging in the UK in the early 1990s, "alt-worship" is seen to have commenced with the Nine O'clock Service in Sheffield and the Late Late Service in Glasgow, a youth worship event modelled on the dance club scene. This was a particular attempt to craft worship that more directly reflected the sub-culture of the young people of the area. The first Australian version was probably the Other Late Late Service in Adelaide in 1995. Café church in Glebe is another example.

The designation "alternative worship" can refer to several quite different kinds of events or gatherings.

- It can refer to worship that is clearly framed around elements of the service of the Lord's Day yet approached very differently in a number of key respects.
- It can also be worship that is more experimental, not necessarily containing all the elements of standard worship. This amounts to worshipful exploration that might involve devotion, study, reflection and prayers, but does not profess to represent the fullness of worship. These gatherings for reflection or celebration certainly contain elements of worship and are indeed worshipful experiences.
- Then there are crafted experiences designed to assist people from any or no faith perspective to explore Christian faith, or to explore their own spirituality. These events are not called Christian worship but the 'alt-worship' tag is often applied to them to give some indication of what they are about.

Alternative worship seeks to craft worship that is both more 'local' in its creation and content, and more post-modern in its approach to meaning-making. So it has some of the following qualities. There is a shift from 'presentation based' worship to varied use of space. There is a movement away from sermon to individual and group examination and reflection on texts. As well as biblical narratives, poetry and prose may be used with careful crafting of the words for worship. There is significant bodily participation by the congregation which may well include moving around. There is the creation of multivalent experiences whereby participants are given space and opportunity for interpretation. It blends and juxtaposes traditional and contemporary symbols and media, including art or junk. Digital media are used in particular the creation of media and the use of 'looped' images and music as backdrop, soundtrack or icon. Congregational singing is limited or omitted entirely. Polychromic rather than monochromic communication (many things at once rather than one) is used and messages and meanings are more intuitive or tacit than obvious or explicit. The worship planners are 'curators' rather than presiders. They create the worship space and the components involved in it for people but to not lead the worship in the usual sense.

Alternative worship then can refer to different worship experiences from those that can and should have a connection with normal Christian worship to those that are

consciously worship or spiritual experiences that do not intend to provide a full diet of worship. Being self aware as to what is being provided and explaining what that is to those who attend is important.

Conclusion

It is helpful for those who are preparing different worship services to know what constitutes a complete Christian worship service so that when they depart from it they are aware of what they are doing and what is being omitted. This might also encourage worship leaders to think of creative ways in which missing elements might be incorporated in contemporary or alternative worship services when the intention is to provide Christian worship for the people.

As said earlier while creativity and contextualisation in worship are to be encouraged so too is an appreciation for what constitutes Christian worship. Worship leaders do well to understand the theology and shape of worship as well as seek to make worship relevant and engaging. The goal of any worship experience is to help people know the living God, hear God's Word which was embodied in Jesus Christ, respond in faith and love, and assist them to be part of God's reconciling and renewing purposes in the world.