



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 9 • Number 3 • Summer 2000

American churchgoers no longer sort themselves out by denomination so much as by musical preference. . . . At bottom we are all still sectarians; we still prefer to congregate with the like minded. Our new sectarianism is a sectarianism of worship style. The new sectarian creeds are dogmas of music. Worship seminars are the seminaries of the new sectarianism; their directors are its theologians. The ministers of the new sectarianism are our church worship leaders.

MICHAEL S. HAMILTON

"THE TRIUMPH OF THE PRAISE SONGS," *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* (JULY 12, 1999), 48:3:2

[The Master] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended on the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages) . . . Because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.

JOHN CALVIN

INSTITUTES, 4:10, 30.

IS OUR WORSHIP ADEQUATELY TRIUNE?

Robert E. Webber

The confusion over worship today runs so deep that some have lost the sense of the relationship between worship and truth. For example, I attended a conference where we sang the chorus, "Father I adore you," and then the second verse, "Jesus, I adore you." Our singing ended without the third verse, "Spirit, I adore you." When the leaders of the conference were asked, "Why didn't you sing the third verse?" the answer was straight forward and without apology. "We don't worship the Holy Spirit." Unfortunately this example of the failure to comprehend basic Christian truth and how it corresponds with worship is altogether too pervasive in the evangelical community.

A phrase in the early church speaks to this concern—*lex orandi, lex credendi, est*. (The rule of prayer is the rule of faith.) How we pray or how we worship forms how we believe. If our worship is not Trinitarian, we will not pass down a Trinitarian faith, and eventually this fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith will be altered or lost. Therefore, I raise the question, "Is our worship adequately triune?"

It is well to remember how worship from its very beginning was rooted in the confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One has only to study the liturgical sources found in the New Testament and the worship literature of the early church. Consider, for example, the Trinitarian nature of the doxologies, benedictions, hymns,

creedal statements, baptismal form, the early church literature of the rule of faith, the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and the structure of the Eucharistic prayers. These Trinitarian confessions regarding God were formed in the worship of the church and handed down as the living tradition of faith in the liturgies of the church. Triune worship has been attested to by time, by the confessions of the Reformation, and still stands as an essential confession of the faith. It is not that our worship should include statements of the Trinity, but that the very structure and substantive essence of our worship is triune.

This Trinitarian essence of worship relates to the biblical teaching that God is both transcendent and immanent. The transcendence is the unknown essence of God which relates to God the Father as the source of the Godhead. The immanence of God is related to the knowledge we have of God revealed in history and incarnate in Jesus Christ and to the immediate experience of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. My article is therefore limited to a brief excursion into the interrelationship between the very essence of worship and the structure of worship. I suggest that while the whole of our worship is Trinitarian, the gathering is oriented toward the Father (praise), the Word toward the Son (proclamation), and Communion toward the Spirit (symbol).

FATHER WORSHIP: THE LANGUAGE OF PRAISE

The Arians who were the major opponents of the Trinity in the fourth century were characterized by the saying, "I know God as he is known to himself." St. John Chrysostom, the fourth-century bishop of Constantiople wrote that it "is an impertinence to say that he who is beyond the apprehension of even the higher powers can be comprehended by us earthworms or compassed and comprised by the weak forces of our understanding."¹ In his five discourses on the incomprehensibility of God (*De Incompre-*

hensibili) Chrysostom, asserts that "he insults God who seeks to apprehend his essential being."² When God, he argued, is incomprehensible in his works, how much more is he incomprehensible in his essential nature? And if God is unknown in his transcendent majesty, even to the Cherubim and Seraphim, how much more unknown is God to humanity?³

The notion of God's incomprehensibility is certainly attested to in Scripture. The visions of God like that of Isaiah (6:1-6), Daniel (10:5-8), and John (Revelation 4-5) speak in the language of poetry and metaphor, not in propositions that can be dissected and understood. Paul speaks of God as unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:6) and, in the great doxological cry to the Romans, Paul cries, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements, and his ways past finding out" (Romans 11:33 κτν). God's transcendence and otherness is worshiped not in propositions which we understand, but in the doxological language of praise which is beyond our full grasp.

Throughout history history this sense of the incomprehensibility of God is clearly expressed in worship. We find it in the great words of the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, the *Te Deum*, the *Kyrie*, and the *Sanctus*. We also find it in the great prayers of the church. Consider, for example, the opening words of the anaphora of the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom that dates back to the fourth century:

O truly existing one, Master, Lord, God almighty and adorable Father, how right it is, and befitting the majesty of your holiness, to praise you, to sing to you, to bless you, to worship you, and to glorify you. You alone are truly God. . . . You are without beginning, invisible, incomprehensible, indescribable, changeless.

. . . You are praised by the angels, the arch angels, the

thrones, the dominions, the principalities, the authorities, the powers and the many-eyed cherubim . . . singing, proclaiming, shouting the hymn of victory: Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord of Hosts! Heaven and earth are filled with your glory.

Father worship, I contend, evokes the sense of God's mystery and our response of awe, wonder, and reverence. In this language of the numinous we admit "before God becomes for us a rationality, absolute reason, a personality, a moral will, he is the wholly nonrational and 'other,' the being of sheer mystery and marvel."⁴ While the mystery of God's otherness may be expressed throughout the text of a worship service, a primary place where this aspect of worship may be expressed in the structure or order of worship is in the gathering. The processional hymn symbolizes our journey into the presence of the ineffable God whom we address in an act of praise and a confession of our sin. Our appropriate response to these acts of worship done in the presence of the Holy One who has called us to gather can only be described in terms like that of the *Mysterium Tremendum*, for we stand in the presence of the Father, the source of all being. In his awesome wholly otherness the only possible response is to fall before him and offer the only response we can make, a language of praise.

SON WORSHIP: THE LANGUAGE OF PROCLAMATION

While we confess we worship one God, we recognize God in three persons. For this reason, we are able to distinguish the revelatory work of God in history culminating in the incarnation, the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Unlike the mystery of God's otherness, the work of God in history is knowable. While we don't confess to know everything about God's revelatory presence in history, we do acknowledge that our worship of God in this instance lies in the realm of intelligibility.

The eastern church Fathers summarized God's work in history with the three words—"creation—incarnation—recreation"—whereas the western church has used the words—"creation—fall—redemption." While there are different slants to these theologies, what is common to them is the biblical record of Creation and the Fall. Also, in common to them is the account of how God initiated a relationship with Abraham, called a people into being in Israel, became incarnate in Jesus, was crucified, buried and resurrected to forgive sin and overcome death. He ascended into heaven and established the church by the gift of the Spirit to witness to the dethroning of the powers and principalities. He now sits at the right hand of God to intercede for us continually, and will return to restore the created order where his shalom will rule forever and ever in the new heavens and the new earth.

In current language this litany is called the Christian metanarrative (meta—with; narrative—story). Christians are characterized by a particular story which we confess to be not just *our* story, but even in the face of a pluralistic world, *the* story for all people.

This story is the good news (*evangelion*). In worship we signify it (*leiturgia*); in evangelism we proclaim it (*kerygma*); in fellowship we experience it (*koinonia*); in our ministry to each other and in our service to others we live it (*diaconia*). It is the very spiritual heartbeat of who we are.

In worship (*leiturgia*) the work of the church is to proclaim God's work in history, to be transformed by it in the present, and because of it to have hope in the coming of the new heavens and the new earth. This story forms us as a community, gives shape to our ethic, and makes us an eschatological people (not just a people who have an eschatology).

Common images of the narrative of God's activity in history and the creation of a community called to proclaim

God's action, to be shaped by it, and to live in it are found in the New Testament descriptions of the worshiping communities such as Acts 2:42-47 and 1 Corinthians 12-14. We are admonished not to forsake worship, but to gather to exhort each other to good works (Hebrews 10:25). This worship is for the edification of the saints (Ephesians 4:12). It has to do with the information of God's revelation which is not mere knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but the record of God's truth for guidance, wisdom, and a life that pleases God and brings glory to his name. This metanarrative, which is the stuff of public worship, shapes our personal worship so that all of life is a "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1).

History attests to the significant role given to the worship of the Son in public worship. Sermons, hymns, choruses, prayers, litanies, Eucharistic prayers, anthems, and the like, sing, proclaim, enact and extol God's work of creating the world, God's involvement in history to save the world, and God's promise to complete his work. This is the *Missio Dei* that worship signifies to the glory of God. While it is found everywhere in worship, it primarily dominates the service of the Word.

SPIRIT WORSHIP: THE LANGUAGE OF SYMBOL

While Father worship evokes mystery and Son worship proclaims a knowable narrative, Spirit worship is apprehended primarily through the concept of presence. We encounter the very essence of God in the experience of the Spirit through the language of symbol.

We confess, of course, that God is present everywhere by virtue of creation. But we also acknowledge that the presence of God is made available in greater intensity through visible and tangible sign. In the Old Testament God was present on the mountain, then in the Tabernacle, especially in the Holy of Holies, at the ark, between the cherubim.

In the New Testament God becomes present in the Word made flesh. Jesus is the image of God (Colossians 1:15). What is invisible has been made flesh. God has been "earthed" and concretized into our historical reality. The God who cannot be contained in all the universe is voluntarily confined in the womb of woman, was born of her, and participated in our earthly life constricted by time, space and history. This incarnational theology affirms that the God who is immaterial communicates to us through materiality. Thus the enfleshed God continues to be present to us by the power of the Spirit in visible and tangible signs.

This God, we confess, dwells within the Church. God's people are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Consequently the primary focus of God's presence in worship is in the symbol of the assembled body. When we gather to worship we become the actualized Church, the body of Christ, mystically united with the head of the Church, Christ. And in this assembly, the priesthood of all believers, there are distinct visible signs of God's presence—tangible ways that Spirit worship happens.

Historically the church has acknowledged the communication of the Spirit in the visible signs of Word, ministry, and sacraments. The Spirit attends the reading and preaching of the Word, the Spirit empowers the minister, the Spirit communicates through water, bread, wine, and oil (to name the chief visible signs). For this reason the act of gathering, the presence and work of the ordained pastor, the reading and preaching of the Word, the rite of baptism, the celebration of the Eucharist, the anointing of oil, and the hands raised in benediction are not empty symbols. They are performative symbols that communicate the reality they represent. While these signs of Spirit communication are present in all of worship, they are primarily present in the concrete tactile signs of bread and wine.

CONCLUSION

In this brief article I have not been able to fully develop the concept that the very essence and structure of worship is triune. But I have attempted to provide enough information to point in a direction that deserves further reflection.

The historic structure of worship is the simple fourfold pattern of gathering in the presence of God, hearing God speak to us through the Word, offering praise and thanksgiving at the table of the Lord, and going forth into the world to love and serve the Lord.

Historically this fourfold pattern is replete with references to the Trinity. Triune worship is found in the doxological praise of the *gloria in excelsis deo*, the Psalms, and with triune praise; the sermon begins "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," the creed is triune, and the prayers invoke the name of the Trinity. The structure of the prayer of thanksgiving at the table of the Lord praises the Father, thankfully remembers the work of the Son, and invokes the presence of the Holy Spirit. And finally, the people are sent forth to love and serve the Lord with the promise that it is God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that goes before them.

My point is that while the Triune God is praised throughout all our worship, the very structure of the fourfold pattern is essentially triune and offers worship to God in three languages of worship. We approach the mystery of the transcendent Father as we gather in God's presence in language of praise; we proclaim the story of God's saving action in history culminating in the work of Christ in the service of the Word through the language of intelligence; and in the service of Communion we are encountered by the Holy Spirit through the language of symbol.

I suggest that in this time when pastors and people are influenced by the dumbing down of worship to reach outward to the unchurched, that we be reminded that worship

is upward. All our worship is directed toward the Triune God who created and redeemed the fallen in the *Missio Dei* and gave us the Spirit through whom a relationship with the Triune God is established. This relationship, initiated and sustained by God, is expressed in the language of praise (Father), the language of proclamation (Son) and the language of symbol (Spirit). So, as I began, I end with the question: "Is our worship adequately triune?"

Author

Robert E. Webber holds the position of William R. and Geraldine B. Myers Professor of Ministry at Northern Baptist Seminary, Lombard, Illinois. He is the author and editor of over twenty books including *The Worship Phenomenon*, *Ancient-Future Faith*, *Worship Old and New*, *Common Roots* and *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship* (seven volumes). He also directs the Institute for Worship Studies. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), Appendixes.
2. *Idea of the Holy*, 180.
3. *Idea of the Holy*, 180.
4. *Idea of the Holy*, 193.

It seems to me, theologically speaking, if we are to have a theology of worship in the Reformed tradition, we need to recover the New Testament understanding of Priesthood at different levels.

(a) We need a recovery of the doctrine of the Sole Priesthood of Christ. . . . Worship is not so much something that we do, but what Christ is doing and in which we are given to participate through the Spirit. He is the One mediator of all communion between God and man, who unites us with himself in his communion with the Father as we sing our Psalms and offer our prayer and praise and meet at the Table "in the name of Christ." The great strength of the Church of Rome in her misguided way is that she preserves the sense of mystery and objectivity in worship by the profound belief that Christ is exercising his Priestly ministry in the Mass. Presbyterian worship today is often far more Pelagian than anything in Rome, by its all too exclusive emphasis on what we do.

(b) We need a recovery of the doctrine of the Priestly ministry of the Spirit. Christ as the One Mediator alone represents God to man and man to God. The Spirit as the Spirit of Christ is speaking Spirit and interceding Spirit (Romans 8). As speaking Spirit he mediates God's Word to men and summons us to faith and obedience. As interceding Spirit, he lifts us up into heavenly places in Christ. He puts the prayer of Jesus into our lips—"Abba, Father." He intercedes for us, helping our infirmities. God draws near to us in Christ through the Spirit, and we are drawn near to God through the blood of Christ by the Spirit. Perhaps in Presbyterianism we have emphasized speaking Spirit at the expense of the interceding Spirit. At the heart of all worship lies the doctrine of the Third Person of the Trinity—that our Ascended Lord, by his Spirit poured out upon his Church at Pentecost, lifts us up into his life of praise and

communion with the Father—so that we know we are "lifted out of ourselves" into an objective world of worship and praise and prayer in communion with all saints.

(c) We need a recovery of the doctrine of the corporate priesthood of the Church where together with all the saints in the name of Christ we bear the joys and the needs and the sorrows of the world on our hearts before God in our worship, and where in the name of Christ we represent God to the world in mission and in *diaconia*—participating in this twofold way in the twofold Mediatorial Ministry of Christ.

(d) We need a recovery of the priestly work of the ministry to complement our prophetic ministry, if we would understand aright both our pastoral office of shepherding the flock and ministering Christ and his forgiveness to the flock and our office as leaders of worship—not in any Pelagian Roman sense, but in the Reformed sense of sharing by grace in the One Ministry of Christ, who is the One True *leitourgos* [Hebrews 8:2] within his Church—the One True Leader of our worship.

JAMES B. TORRANCE, "COVENANT OR CONTRACT? A STUDY IN THE THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF WORSHIP IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTLAND," *SCOTTISH JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY* (1970), 23:75-76.