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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



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Classical Worship for Today: *Roots in the Worship Storms*



Wilbur Ellsworth

*E*vangelicals . . . regard as the only possible road to the reunion of the churches the need of biblical reformation. In their view the only solid hope for churches which desire to unite is a common willingness to sit down together under the authority of God's Word, in order to be judged and reformed by it.

JOHN R. W. STOTT

*T*heology is the responsibility and practice of the Church. Those who are concerned for theology must be responsible to the whole of Christian tradition, not just a sectarian part. The core is expressed in the earliest ecumenical creeds. These creeds do not "teach" the whole of that faith but they do provide a necessary framework for what really matters. Here the church leader can see what really matters. Here the minister can root his life and calling in the received faith of the whole Church.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG

*S*torms uproot trees. Every time a powerful storm sweeps through a region some trees that have stood tall and majestically for decades lie on the ground in defeat. Suddenly the landscape is changed and trees that had adorned the earth, provided shelter, beauty and quiet are no more. When a great tree goes down there is a profound sense of loss, for it will take years for another to take its place. Great trees fall before the power of the storm when their roots no longer can stand against the force the storm exerts on them.

Today the Church is living in a worship storm. Congregations that have stood with their pastors for years in lifting up their hearts to God in worship are lying prostrate with roots ripped from the earth. The tragedy seems to be escaping no one. The success stories of fast-growing young trees to replace the tired old oaks are spawning books and seminars. It is not entirely comforting, however, that the success stories of a few years ago seem to require frequent updating because the worship winds continue to blow and the message is clear: Keep changing or down you go. Sadly, the country is strewn with pastors who once were regarded with appreciation for their leadership in worship but somehow failed to keep up with the changes the worship storm requires.

People are asking if there are any roots to help them stand

in this storm. Some leaders are saying there really are no roots. One prominent pastor of a large and growing church told a gathering of pastors that at his church, "We don't sing hymns because we don't know any." Another Christian trendsetter has said that quoting people like Charles Spurgeon is irrelevant because no one knows about him anymore. Another pastor of a growing church said that his seminary education did not include any theological reflection on worship. When pressed further he said he saw no problem with that because he didn't see any connection between theology and what the Church does in worship.

These spokesmen don't seem to lament a lack of roots but rather affirm that they have a great set of wheels to keep them moving through the ever-changing fashions and tastes of popular culture. In other words, they are rolling along on *evangelical pragmatism*. *Evangelical pragmatism* is not without its redeeming value. It is, after all, sincerely concerned with relating to the culture around the Church and drawing people to face their need of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. While that motivation is commendable, however, it has not and cannot provide roots in the worship storm because it does not adequately ask the hard questions about the culture it is trying to reach. The old debating proverb rings true: "Whoever gets to ask the question wins the debate." The questions, demands, and tastes of popular culture presuppose a worldview that is radically different from the realm that the Church is called to enter when it gathers to draw near to God. Further, whenever the culture changes its interests, the church that is rooted in evangelical pragmatism will have to change its worship. Evangelical pragmatism so dominates the American evangelical Church that the continual parade of changing worship styles seems not only normal but dynamic and exciting as we "keep on the cutting edge" to reach our world. What we fail to notice, however, is that our "target audience" (a basic component of evangelical pragmatism) essentially sets the shape, tone, and agenda of Christian worship. Even if we can agree that the culture of our target audience is a key component in evangelism, can we really allow those outside the

family of faith to determine how God's family will worship him?

I propose that the roots we need are to be found in the history of the Church's theological reflection on worship, first as we find it in Scripture and then as we trace the Church's long history through the centuries with all the changes and pressures that have been hurled against it. Such a search will reveal several strong roots.

1. *The sacramental view of worship*. The sacramental view of the world contemplates the towering affirmations of Scripture, "The whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3) and "The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord" (Psalm 33:5). A century of a "scientific" materialism has robbed our prevailing culture of seeing either the glory or the love of God in creation. Our society seems blind to a world brimming over with the beauty and goodness of the Lord. Not even "getting back to nature" will correct the insensitivity to God's transcendent presence in his creation. Christian pragmatists would do well to reflect on how much they have allowed this rational reductionism to shape their own viewpoint as they choose Scripture texts to justify their worship practices. Sentimentality in music and practicality in sermons will not restore this lost vision. Pragmatism is rooted in naturalism and naturalism places God at the edge of life, if it gives him place at all. The Church needs to regain the root of a sacramental view of worship.

2. *The liturgical view of worship*. Few evangelicals seem to grasp the profound worship implications of Colossians 3:16-17, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." This text serves as a theological plumbline by which we can evaluate what we do in worship. There are two central themes in this call to the Church: (1) The word of Christ (or Christ-centered proclamation) must be formative to the entire worship experience, and (2) The peo-

ple of God are to communicate to God and to each other "in wisdom" and in singing that is marked by profound thankfulness. One of the basic facts of godly worship through the centuries is that God has called his people to participate in worship both actively and corporately. The Church has a word for this (although it has become a forbidden word among many evangelicals). It is *liturgy*. Before we react to the negative connotations that word evokes, let us remember that liturgy simply means "the work of the people." It means that the people must speak wisely and sing with specific focus on thanks to God. In order to see what this means we must move beyond the prison of our rather recent commitment to individualism and spontaneity. Throughout the history of the Church people have united their voices in words and song that were wise because they were rooted in great thoughts of God found in Scripture and in the meditations of the Church and in songs to God that profoundly express the deepest, highest and fullest expressions of the redeemed human heart to God. The Christ-saturated Word and the Christ-saturated heart find joy, freedom, and exaltation in serving the Lord in worship through a united liturgy. Liturgical worship does not allow people merely to sit, watch and listen. Liturgical worship means all the people are serving God.

3. *The shape of worship.* Those of us who have spent most of our Christian lives in freeform worship may be surprised to know that while our experience reflects the American evangelical majority, we are in deep discontinuity with most of church history. Classical Christian writers such as Gregory Dix and more recently Robert Webber show through careful historic investigation that from the earliest days of the Church there has emerged a "shape" or structure in Christian worship. From Hippolytus to Chrysostom to Luther and Calvin, there has been a structure of worship acts and components that remarkably extended across the Church. One of the great issues throughout the history of the Church has been the importance of achieving a vital spiritual balance between feeding on Christ in the preaching of the Word and feeding on Christ at the Lord's Table. I suggest that one of the reasons

so many new "creative" elements have made their way into what we call "contemporary worship" is that much of the historical shape of worship has been lost due to ignorance, neglect, or reaction to excesses and corruption in worship. If we are to sing to God in his triune glory, give thanks for his redeeming love in Jesus Christ, confess our sins and sinfulness together, hear extensive readings from Holy Scripture, receive Christ-centered preaching, respond to God's Word in wholehearted communion with God and his people at the Lord's Table, and be sent out into the world to love and serve the Lord, our worship will be full and overflowing. There will be neither need nor time for most of these recent innovations.

If we are gently, humbly, and patiently teaching our people the theology of a sacramental view of worship, a liturgical understanding of worship and the historic shape of worship, we may find ourselves and our congregations sheltered from the storms that are troubling so much of the Church today. Worship storms call us to nourish the roots that will keep our churches standing tall and reaching toward heaven to the glory of God.

Author

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