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THINKING AMONG BAPTISTS – THE RENEWAL OF LITURGY IN A LOCAL CHURCH

Stephen F. Winward

My purpose is to indicate five main ways in which Church worship is in need of drastic reformation, in the light of the new insights supplied by Biblical theology and of the principles of the Liturgical Movement.

1. Worship as Dialogue

I begin with the structure of pattern of our worship—or rather the widespread absence of such a structure. When I visit a Baptist Church, I am offered an 'order of service' which consists of a large number of 'items'. If I enquire why these are arranged in a certain sequence, no explanation is given beyond saying that this is the customary order. On other occasions I find that these items have been re-shuffled like a pack of cards. There are so many items, and it does not seem to matter in what order we have them. There is, in other words, little or no awareness of the fact that, like the human body with its organs and skeleton, worship has a *given* structure which should be exhibited in the liturgy. This given structure is the dialogue of Revelation and Response, of the divine Word and the human Answer.

On the western exterior of the Abbey at Bath, Jacob's ladder, with the ascending and descending angels, is carved in stone as a symbol of worship. In his dream at Bethel, the patriarch sees a stairway reaching from earth to heaven. On this 'ladder' there is movement in two directions—messengers are ascending and descending. It is a vision of the two-way communication constantly taking place between earth and heaven. Here God takes the initiative in revealing Himself to Jacob—He speaks, promising to give him the land on which he lies and descendants without number. On waking, Jacob responds to this revelation in spoken word and sacramental act—he sets up a monolith, consecrates it with oil and makes a vow. Here is revelation and response, message and prayer, divine promise and human vow. The vision and the message elicit a response in which word and action and awe are combined.

The structure of our church worship should exhibit this typical biblical dialogue of revelation and response—and the revelation precedes the response, the divine Word the human Answer. This is not the case in Baptist worship today. We have turned the service described by Justin Martyr[1] in the second century upside down, by placing the main praises and prayers of the people *before* the Word of God—read and preached.

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What is more, unlike Jacob and Justin, and contrary to the intentions of Luther and Calvin, we have limited the human Answer to spoken words, eliminating on most occasions the sacramental action.*

2. Worship as Offering

Our second need is to recover the Biblical conviction that worship is offering. Look at the first act of worship in the Bible, which is typical of Hebrew worship at Tabernacle, High Place, and Temple. Righteous Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock, and on a rude stone altar offered them to God. Worship is vegetable or animal sacrifice accompanied by praise and prayer. And when Christ came, and offered a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice once for all, worship did not cease to be sacrificial. In response to the one, true, immortal sacrifice of Christ, and made acceptable by that sacrifice, the Christian priesthood is to offer continually the "spiritual sacrifices" of praise and prayer, service and witness, costly gift and holy living.

But what reply should I receive if I were to stand today in the porch of a chapel, and ask each worshipper 'Why have you come to Church?'? He would not say, 'I have come to make an offering'. He would probably say 'I have come to get a blessing'—or words to that effect. The biblical 'Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness . . . bring an offering and come into His courts' has become 'Seek uplift in an atmosphere of peace, get a blessing in His courts'!

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*Perhaps I can best indicate what I believe to be the true structure of the liturgy by outlining the weekly Sunday morning service of my own local Church. It is conducted from behind the Lord's Table facing the people, and has three main parts:

The Preparation
- Scriptural Call to Worship
- Hymn of Praise
- Call to Penitence, Confession of Sin, Declaration of Pardon
- Prayer of Supplication
- Collection of Gifts (retained at the rear of the chapel)
- Notices (if any)

The Liturgy of the Word
- Old Testament and/or the Epistle
- Psalm (sung or read responsively by Pastor and People)
- The Gospel and the Sermon
- Confession of Faith (Creed or Hymn)
- Prayers of Intercession and the Lord's Prayer
- Invitation to the Lord's Table

The Liturgy of the Upper Room
- Offertory Sentences, Offertory Procession (in which gifts and communion elements are brought to the Table), Offertory Prayer
- Hymn and Sentences for Communion
- The Prayer of Thanksgiving
- The Breaking (literally) of the Bread with the Words of Institution
- The Distribution of the Elements and Reception
- Post-Communion Prayer, Hymn of Praise, Benediction.

In this pattern, all the parts of the Word, read and spoken, are together, and *precede* the main prayers of the people and the sacramental action. It has the same basic structure as the service of Justin and Calvin, and sees worship as Dialogue between God and man.

In reaction against the 'sacrifices of Masses', the left wing of the Reformation became suspicious of, and usually hostile to, the whole conception of worship as offering. It is still maintained today, by some, that the Christian cannot offer anything to God, since this has already been done for him by Christ. The Puritans, in particular, so emphasised the downward movement of revelation and communication through the Word, that they made inadequate provision for the upward movement of the worshippers. 'If, for convenient but not absolute purposes of description, a distinction can be made between the downward movement of revelation and the upward movement of aspiring human response, then the Puritan cultus stressed the former and the Anglican cultus the latter'.[2]

Our task is to correct this distortion, not by seeking to belittle that which God gives and we receive in worship, but by insisting that the true response to divine giving is human giving, i.e. offering. 'Graciousness by definition cannot pauperise the recipient; and *agape* can never be "a charity" in the odious sense of a benefit condescendingly conferred upon a passive beneficiary . . . the illimitable riches of God's grace and generosity cannot be accepted without the most costly response of which we are capable'.[3]

Four things are involved in the recovery of this awareness that worship is offering. The people must be taught that *praise* is a sacrifice to be offered up to God; we do not, or should not, sing psalms and hymns to get 'uplift', pleasant emotional experiences, or even 'messages'. Likewise *prayer* is a spiritual sacrifice offered by the priestly community to God on behalf of mankind—it is not a sermonette to help or edify the congregation. It also means that the *offering of gifts* is seen as an essential part of worship. The offertory is the place where God's stewards and fellow-workers offer up the fruits of their labour to God for His purposes.

Most of all it is bound up with the recovery of a true *doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice*. In the past ,when theologians and people alike thought of sacrifice exclusively in terms of the death of the victim and not also, as the Bible does, of the offering of its life, and when the purpose of sacrifice was regarded as predominantly propitiatory, and the elements of oblation and communion so prominent in the biblical sacrifices were ignored—then Christians were shut up to the false antithesis. Either the Eucharist was a repetition of the sacrifice of the cross, or it was a mere memorial of it. It is in fact neither. 'It is not a question of recalling something which happened 2,000 years ago on Golgotha. The past is here too the present, as the Lord Himself makes the past and eternally valid sacrifice contemporaneous with us'.[4] As we 'spread forth' the sacrifice of Christ we both receive him who gave and gives himself, and—united sacramentally with him—we offer ourselves to God as the climax of our *sacrificium laudis*.

3. Embodied Worship*

Our worship is also in need of reform, because it is predominantly verbal and disembodied. A contrast may help to make this clear. Consider the kind of worship offered by David when he first brought the Ark

*Mr. Winward has also dealt with this aspect of worship in his essay contributed to *The Renewal of Worship* (ed. R. C. D. Jasper, Oxford, 1965)—J.M.S.-M.

of God into Jerusalem. The Ark itself was the embodied presence—for God Himself was closely associated, if not identified, with that cultic symbol. The eyes, as well as the ears, were involved. So also were the bodies of the worshippers in the solemn procession. The devotion of David was expressed outwardly in the dance. And procession, dance, music, shouting and song were consummated in sacrifice and sacrament in the total gift of the burnt offering and the communal feasts of the peace offering. All this was very far from being a 'purely spiritual' act of worship. The divine presence and the human response were alike embodied. The Ark, the dance, and the offerings may be taken as representing the three strands—symbol, ritual, sacrifice—which were the main constituents of the cult, the embodiment of Hebrew worship. Inner devotion was given outward expression, in words and deeds, in patterns of activity which included the body, made use of matter, and were perceptible to the senses.

Now, by way of contrast, look at the worship of a Strict Baptist Church in England today! It consists of a hymn, a long extempore prayer, a hymn, the reading of a whole chapter of the Bible, the collection, a hymn, a sermon of forty-five minutes, a hymn, the benediction. Apart from the collection, it is all words, and, apart from the hymns, all the words are spoken by one man. This type of service they would defend, as over against the 'crude and primitive' worship of David, by citing the words of our Lord to the woman at Sychar: 'God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth'. Such interpretation completely overlooks the fact that 'spirit' in the Old Testament means life-giving, creative activity (as in Ezekiel 37). As in other traditions, they are the victims of the baneful influence of Zwingli of Zurich, the principal opponent of embodied worship. Almost Manichaean in his contrast between the material and the spiritual, Zwingli abolished the physical and the sensuous, symbol and ceremony, and relegated worship to the sphere of the mind.

In the Puritan-Pietist tradition, there is marked hostility to the outward embodiments of worship. The ideal here is a 'purely spiritual' worship—by which is meant an exclusively verbal worship. That which is addressed to the mind is allowed; all appeal to the senses (other than hearing) is excluded. You may be spoken to, and you may speak—that is all. You may use the ear-gate but not the eye-gate, the mind but not the body. The limitations and weaknesses of such a type of worship are obvious. Addressed almost exclusively to the mind, and making large demands on the attention, it is hardly surprising that in an age of television and the cinema, it makes little appeal to the proletariat. It is too wordy, notional, abstract, intellectualistic.

We, the heirs of the Puritan tradition, need to complement our stress on the inward (complement, not abandon) by an appreciation of the importance of the outward components of worship. That is to say, we must take symbol, ceremony, and sacrament more seriously. While

continuing to appreciate the vital importance of verbal symbols, we must also make more use of visual symbols.

The most important of these 'externals' is the church building itself.[5] Symbols within the building—the Lord's Table, the Baptistry, the Pulpit, the Lectern, the Bible, lights, pictures, etc.—are also important. Nor must we be afraid to use the body in worship—to stand, kneel, bow, to use the hands in prayer as in preaching. The outward as well as the inward is involved in the total response of an animated body (not a pure spirit) to the revelation of God *in the flesh*. The Incarnation implies embodied worship.

4. Liturgy and Liberty

We are also confronted with the task of overcoming the false antithesis which in the past has been created between liturgy and liberty. In 1662 the Act of Uniformity sought to impose a fixed written liturgy upon the Churches of this country. In their laudable resistance to a fixed, excessively stylised, and enacted (State enacted) liturgy, many of our forefathers were driven into opposition to liturgy as such. Among Free Churchmen there is still a widespread misunderstanding of the true nature of liturgy. It is assumed that liturgy is *necessarily* a form of service in which all the words are written down, prescribed by ecclesiastical, or even State, authority, and constantly repeated. This is to define liturgy in terms of one particular manifestation of it—a manifestation incompatible with true liberty.

In the New Testament *leitourgia* is the work of the People of God, whether assembled or dispersed. When the People are assembled, the liturgy is the place of encounter between Lord and Church, the vehicle of divine revelation and human response. It is worship *ordered* so as, on the one hand, to declare the whole Gospel, and on the other hand to enable the people to make an adequate response—in union with the whole Church militant and triumphant.

Since liberty and liturgy, spontaneity and order, are both alike essential to full Christian worship, we must seek to avoid the two extremes taught us by Church history. At the one extreme is the prescribed, inflexible liturgy which leaves little or no room for variation and adaptation, for the 'inspired spontaneity' and freedom of the Holy Spirit. At the other extreme is the disorder and anarchy, the subjectivism and individualism, the confusion and poverty of content which results when the Biblical and traditional forms of worship are jettisoned—the 'squalid sluttery of fanatic conventicles'. The right way of combining liberty and liturgy is by provision of *Common Order*, in which the biblical precedent of prescribing the actions but not the words is followed. Orders, rubrics, and words for the various services of the church are provided as patterns and for guidance, but not fixed or prescribed (the vast difference between the words 'provide' and 'prescribe' should be noted).

All over the world, Baptists have so far failed to provide the order and content of worship. We have been left at the mercy of what Calvin called 'the capricious giddiness' of individual ministers, most of whom

have received no training in the principles of worship. 'It is one of the tragedies of the situation that the Churches which have given their ministers the maximum liberty of liturgical improvisations are those which have given them the minimum training in liturgical principles'.[6] In our book, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship*,[7] Dr. E. A. Payne and I have made a first attempt to provide Baptists in Britain with a book of common order. But a book for the pastor is not enough: the people need a prayer book for much the same reason as they need a praise book although for a long time there was opposition to the latter in our churches. Congregational worship would be impoverished if there were only solo praise—especially if it came from the pastor! Ought we to be satisfied with one man praying and the others listening—as the *only* way of praying?

5. Congregational Participation*

The greatest single weakness of Baptist worship is the way in which the man in the pulpit monopolises the service. While we pay lip service to the priesthood of all believers, our worship is predominantly a one-man affair. In this respect we have failed to leave behind the clericalism and sacerdotalism of the Roman Church. 'New presbyter' in this realm also is but 'old priest writ large' (John Milton). In this respect our worship compares unfavourably with that of the Bible and the primitive Church. In the early sacrificial worship of Israel, in the later synagogue, in the pentecostal worship described in 1 Corinthians 14, in ante-Nicene worship, the people took an active part. But in Baptist services the Minister does almost everything—he reads the Scriptures, offers prayers as a monologue, preaches the sermon, and administers the sacraments with a minimum of aid. All that is left to the congregation is singing hymns and giving money. I should like to mention here some of the attempts we have made in our local church to develop and encourage congregational participation.

(*a*) We have a lectern as well as a pulpit, and different laymen are selected each Sunday to read the lessons.

(*b*) The Psalms are said responsively by Pastor and People.

(*c*) We make use of memorised dialogue in our services. The parts recited by the People are memorised in the Church Meeting (week nights) and added to from time to time.

(*d*) A layman frequently recites the offertory sentences, and when the stewards have brought forward the gifts, the People, standing, say the offertory prayer.

(*e*) We make some use of the ancient three-fold way of offering intercessions. A Deacon gives the bidding "Let us pray for . . . ". In an adequate period of silence, the People then pray as bidden, after which

*Mr. Winward has elsewhere (*The Reformation of our Worship*, 102, 109) acknowledged the place accorded to this ideal among the Brethren. However, before we congratulate ourselves that we know all about this subject, let us reflect on the pertinence of Mr. Winward's remarks to the conduct of services other than the Breaking of Bread—J.M.S.-M.

the Pastor "collects" the silent prayers in a few concise sentences (the origin and proper use of the collect). A second bidding is then given by the Deacon, and so on.

(*f*) We frequently, but not in all services, say prayers together out of a book.[8] The parts to be said together are printed in italics. This book includes a large selection from the Psalter, much other scriptural material, and the 'garnered excellence of the saints'.

While no one of these ways of encouraging congregational participation, taken by itself, goes very far, yet when they are all used, considerable advance has been made, especially in the direction of common prayer.

Epilogue

Just a brief word in conclusion. The principles of the Liturgical Movement challenge us to reform and renewal in different ways. With Anglicans, for instance, I should have sought to share the great positive values of our worship tradition, some of which they lack. Instead of the five aspects I have selected, I should have chosen five others—the centrality in our services of the Word of God, read and preached, the fervour and quality of our congregational praise, our flexible approach which leaves ample room for the freedom of the Holy Spirit, the warmth of fellowship which characterises much of our worship, the evangelical conviction and concern of our preachers and people. These five characteristics I, in common with you, value immensely. I have not spoken of them because, thank God, these things are a reality in our churches. Without losing these treasures of our heritage, we need rather to attend to the ways in which our worship is in need of reformation and renewal. Perhaps of the five aspects I have selected, I may use the Saviour's words: 'It is these you should have practised, without neglecting the others'.

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1. *First Apology*, 67: translation in, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 196.
2. Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 32.
3. C. F. D. Moule, *The Parish Communion Today*, ed. D. M. Paton, 84.
4. G. Aulen, *Eucharist and Sacrifice*, 192.
5. On the bearing of the principles of the Liturgical Movement on church architecture, see Peter Hammond, *Towards a Church Architecture*, and Basil Minchin, *Outward and Visible*.
6. L. Newbigin, *A South India Diary*, 86.
7. Carey Kingsgate Press, 1960.
8. S. F. Winward, *Responsive Praises and Prayers for Minister and Congregation, Hodder and Stoughton, 1958*.

Now if the form of the service of worship is to help express this two-sided character of the reality of God—this nearness and this 'total otherness'—then *both* must find expression in form. There must be both the liturgical presentation of the majesty of God, which reaches out beyond the ages and in the language of tradition transcends the present moment, *and* that nearness of God in our market places and our highways and hedges.

Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon*, p. 30