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Worship and Prayer: Principles and Problems

I R. F. ALDWINCKLE

Liturgy and Language

Everyone today is talking about the problem of communication. As this talk relates to the theological problem, it has resulted in charges that the language used by Christians is obsolete, in the sense that it is no longer meaningful to contemporary man. How far is this true, and what relevance has the charge to liturgy, that is, to the worship of the Christian church? This paper will confine itself exclusively to the language employed in the public worship of the church, not to the language used by individuals in conversation with each other or in private devotion, or with what ought to be the language employed by theologians in their writings or their dialogue with each other.

Throughout the world on every Sunday, and sometimes on other days, priests and ministers or clergymen are leading their people in the worship of God. What kind of language do they use, and how far is it true to say that the language obscures or simply fails to convey the meaning and significance of the Christian faith for modern man? This question obviously goes straight to the heart of Christian theology, since it raises the crucial problem of the possibility of giving linguistic expression to the Christian faith, as faith in the transcendent and living God, and therefore, ultimately, of the possibility of faith itself. I shall not attempt, however, to argue for public worship as directed to God, as interpreted by Christian faith and experience. I accept as a starting-point the stated theological basis of the World Council of Churches: 'The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'¹ (If 'God is dead' is not only a description of contemporary man's state of mind but a justifiable denial of God's reality as other than man's psychic states, then obviously worship cannot be directed to God in the classic sense. We might still defend it, as Julian Huxley does, for its therapeutic value, but not as an address to a transcendent and living Creator and Redeemer. For my present purpose, however, I shall take for granted the historic Christian understanding of faith and worship.)

An initial problem is presented by the vast variety of the forms of worship. In these ecumenical days one cannot discuss this topic in terms only of the

1. Norman Goodall, ed., *The Uppsala Report 1968* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), p. 94.

form of worship with which one happens to be familiar. I shall, therefore, begin with the classification of types of worship given some years ago in a Faith and Order report on 'Ways of Worship.'² These types are:

- 1 *Liturgical worship*, involving the use of fixed forms, however varied, plus the ceremonial use of dress, action, colour, lights, as supplemental ways of 'seeing' what the liturgy says.
- 2 *'Free' worship*, where the emphasis is on the freedom of the Spirit – resulting, in the more extreme forms, in an aversion to conscious preparation of prayer and patterns of worship. Such 'free' worship is often controlled by knowledge of Scripture, though the more radical groups would consider themselves free not to use even fixed forms – for example, the Lord's Prayer – derived from the Bible.
- 3 *Eucharist-centred worship*, regarded as the norm and fount of all true worship. The catholic tradition – Roman, Orthodox, and Anglican – would strongly emphasize this. This same conviction was very evident in the Uppsala discussions on intercommunion and in the recommendation of section III that the churches should consider reintroducing a weekly observance of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.
- 4 *Preaching-centred worship*, where the preaching of the word of God, understood in relation to the authority of Scripture as the revealed word, becomes central. This does not mean the exclusion of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but it does mean that the preached word and the sacrament are regarded as indissolubly bound together, if the sacrament is to be truly meaningful as the acted, parabolic, and effective communication of the divine word contained in Scripture.
- 5 *Waiting upon the Spirit*, a category intended to recognize the significance of the kind of worship associated with the Society of Friends, with their emphasis on silence, their disregard of the physical symbols of the sacraments, and their use of language only in moments of inspired utterance led by the Spirit, and not as part of any prearranged pattern of worship.

It may be objected that the lines drawn by this classification of the different types of worship are too hard and fast, and this we may admit. However, it may be accepted as a useful working analysis for the purposes of our discussion. It is clear from this rough classification of types that the problem of language takes very different forms according to the context. When it is said that the church is failing in the communication of its essential message, is the criticism meant to apply to every kind of worship in all places? And is the criticism really a criticism of the church's *language*? Is it not perhaps only another way of saying that, in the opinion of the critic, the church is failing, rather than a judgment bearing specifically on the church's use of language? It may be that the world understands very well what the church is saying, but fails to see in the life of Christian people, either individually or corporately, an effective and compelling embodiment of the gospel it preaches. We are

2. Cf. *Ways of Worship: The Report of a Theological Commission of Faith and Order* (London: SCM Press, 1951).

not here concerned with the church's failure in this broad sense, if it is indeed a total failure – a matter about which there could be much dispute. We are only concerned with the church's failure in so far as this is supposed to be the result of its failure adequately to communicate the gospel in language fitted for our day. It is clear, of course, from the start that this is not going to be an easy matter, for the simple reason that what is meaningful in one situation may not be so in another. Differences of race, education, intellectual cultivation, national tradition, and cultural patterns will all play a part in determining the adequacy or inadequacy of the language used in worship. The sort of language that would be meaningful to our sophisticated western élites would fall on deaf ears, not only in wide areas of Africa, China, India, and South America, but also within the large, half-educated section of the population in the so-called advanced countries. It is clear that no one kind of language is going to make worship understandable and meaningful to all these people. We shall return later to this issue.

Let us consider again for a moment our previous classification of types of worship. All these types appeal in some degree to the Bible, and in all of them the language of Scripture finds its way into the liturgy. Even where the freedom of the Spirit is most emphasized, it is often the words of Scripture which come forth in the spontaneous, extemporaneous, or 'inspired' utterances. The problem of biblical language would appear, therefore, to be central for all the types enumerated. Can we say, then, that the language of the Bible hinders the very communication of the message it expects to impart? Since only a very few Christians are going to read the Scriptures in the original tongues of Hebrew and Greek, the question of translation becomes of paramount importance. It is clear that a translation into the idiom of a bygone age is going to put up difficult barriers against a full understanding. This fact, however, is now widely recognized. The Roman Catholic church itself, closely tied to Latin as it has been for historical reasons, is beginning to recognize the wisdom of letting the Christian worship in his native tongue, in part at least, if not wholly. Assuming, therefore, that Christians in the days to come will have an idiomatic translation of the Scriptures in their native language, is the biblical language still a hindrance to understanding, and therefore to be used only very sparingly in the liturgy of the church?

Various answers can be given to this question. Some will say 'Yes,' and seek to substitute non-biblical language. This is obviously a difficult undertaking, and there is a notorious lack of agreement at the moment as to precisely what sort of language should be substituted for that of Holy Writ. Others will take a mediating position and argue that, while some biblical language needs to be replaced by non-biblical terms, some of it can still be used, because it speaks clearly to any man who reads it. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan seems to make its point to any man who reads it without prejudice or moral blindness. On the other hand, the language of 'sin' implies a whole host of notions about the holiness of God, the reality of conscience and divine judgment, guilt and responsibility – about all of which modern man is, to put

it mildly, hopelessly confused, and to which he is often openly hostile. Can a change of language make the biblical message more understandable and acceptable? The answer could very well be 'yes' though the new language might have the opposite effect. (E.g. is Tillich's 'estrangement' a true substitute for 'sin'?) It is possible that, if modern men really came to understand what the Bible is saying, they might be even more hostile than they are now. Dean Inge once caustically remarked that the churches would be even emptier than they are if the gospel was really preached in them.

It is obviously no easy question to decide when the ineffectiveness of the liturgy is the result of the inadequacy of its language to convey its true meaning, and when it is the result of modern man's rejection of the theological assumptions which underlie such language. If the former is the only problem, it ought not to be beyond the wit of man to experiment with new forms of language until the meaning intended is made plain. The latter problem, however, is of vaster dimensions; namely, modern man must be helped to the point where he can again affirm wholeheartedly the basic Christian beliefs. But, say some, this is precisely the question: what is basic and what is not? It is evident that, if a would-be worshipper no longer believes in God, liturgical language which assumes this belief will constitute a problem for him. It is also doubtful whether a mere change of language, though helpful, will really assist him. His difficulties in this case spring, not from the fact that the meaning of the language is obscure, but from the fact that he cannot, for whatever reason, convince himself of the truth of what is being affirmed. It is not very creditable to the intelligence of the atheist, for example, to argue that he does not know what he is saying, and that if he did, he would not be an atheist but a Christian. This is equivalent to saying that only the stupid are atheists, and few modern Christians would have the temerity to say that. The problem of atheism can hardly be solved in such a cavalier fashion.

It is also clear that the language of the liturgy, whether 'fixed' or 'flexible,' must aim at universality in its appeal; that is to say, it must be capable of being used meaningfully and profitably by all sorts and conditions of men - not simply by the sophisticated intellectuals in the congregation, who must at any time represent only a minority. There is much to be said for continuity of language in worship, both in the use of the biblical language itself and in the corporate worship of the church generally. The problem of the proper and full understanding of this language could be solved, at least in part, if the church took its educational task more seriously instead of attempting to find a substitute language for that of the Bible and the liturgy. Study groups, whether in church or in the home, could address themselves to the problem of understanding the language of the Bible and of the historic creeds and confessions. The clergy have opportunities, through various organizations in the church, particularly among the young, to discuss the nature of Christian truth and the most appropriate language to express it.

The corporate worship of the church is, after all, designed as an act of the believing community, and not simply as a witness to the 'outsider.' A liturgy,

whether 'Catholic' or 'Free Church,' must inevitably be puzzling to the real outsider, who lacks even an elementary knowledge of what the Christian faith is about. This does not mean that the formal worship of the Church, if engaged in by believers with a vital experience of the Spirit's presence, might not be a potent witness to the meaning of life in Christ, which would evoke significant echoes and responses, even in the 'pagan' or modern secular man who is present – if he is ever present. It may be that we should make a much clearer distinction between worship as a corporate act of the community of the faithful and various attempts to commend the gospel to the unbeliever. There are some who would make every act of worship an 'evangelistic' service in this latter sense, ranging all the way from preaching for a verdict to giving an altar call to come forward and confess Christ. The danger of making every service evangelistic in this sense is that this pattern may become as formal and stereotyped as any traditional liturgy. Furthermore, such a policy deprives the corporate body of believers of that training and education in worship which will ground their faith in the whole man, and not simply in transient emotions.

We sometimes speak disparagingly of edifying the saints, and the clergy may become depressed at having to lead the same people in worship Sunday by Sunday. Yet if the Christian life is not fixed at one stage, but is a continual growing into the stature of the fullness of Christ, there can be nothing more important than the kind of worship which enables the Christian to grow in the faith. Such growth means not only more adequate intellectual understanding of Christian doctrine, but also a fuller experimental grasp of the meaning of worship and prayer in practice. As the French would say, it is 'la religion vécue' with which worship is concerned – religion 'lived' in the sense of learning what it actually means to know God and to realize his presence through adoration, praise, intercession, and the mysterious activity of the Spirit as he makes known to us in the depths of the inner being the realities of the spiritual life. While it is true that such worship will issue in action directed to witness, service, and love, it is no proper substitute for such worship to turn prayer into a list of social grievances culled from the contemporary situation. For the Christian, the proper place to start is the worship of God, however true it may be that such worship is meaningless if it does not result in devoted love of neighbour. If, then, there is a valid distinction between the worship of the believing community, aimed at building up the church in faith and love and a knowledge of the real presence of God, and evangelism, directed to commending the gospel to those who have not even a rudimentary knowledge of Christian belief, obviously the intention of a particular act of worship must dictate the kind of language used. Whether its meaning is properly understood will also depend upon the degree of education of the individual involved. There is a vast difference in this respect, even within the believing community itself. Some Christians, even though they are familiar enough with the forms of worship to get something out of them, often fail to understand certain kinds of language because they lack a general background of knowledge and, consequently, an adequate vocabulary. Lack of knowledge of the English language

in all its rich variety may be a very potent factor in hindering some people from using certain kinds of language in a meaningful way.

I confess that I find it very difficult in certain cases to decide whether the language barrier could be overcome by more education and knowledge or whether there is something intrinsic to the language itself which constitutes the barrier. For example, we all sing hymns in which the vocabulary of the Latin expression of the doctrine of the Trinity is used – for example:

Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!

Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;

Holy, Holy, Holy! merciful and mighty!

God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

It is safe to say that many who sing these words have little technical knowledge of the evolution of Christian doctrine in general or of the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. Few appreciate the intricate discussions of the theologians concerning the exact meaning of *persona* at the time when the doctrine was being formulated. What do we do in this case? Ought we to go through all the hymns and prayers of the church and eliminate the word 'person' in this connection, following Barth's suggestion that it is more confusing than helpful, since modern men almost inevitably equate person with personality in the modern sense. (Such an equation obviously involves the risk of a tritheistic conception of God, which is alien to biblical ideas and which contradicts the intention of the original formula.) Or ought we to retain the ancient language in our worship and take more seriously the educational task of showing our people what the original doctrine was intended to say and to safeguard? Personally, I am inclined to the latter solution. We also sing many Christmas carols full of echoes, and sometimes of the actual language, of the ancient creeds. Some liturgies include the recitation of ancient symbols of the faith, such as the Nicene creed. What does the worshipper make of such language about the Son as 'being of one substance with the Father'? Since the word 'substance' suggests to most people today physical reality, there is obviously an occasion here for serious and disastrous misunderstanding. How many people who sing the fifth verse of Newman's famous hymn know much about the Chalcedonian Christology which lies behind it?

O generous love! that he who smote

In Man for man the foe,

The double agony in Man

For man should undergo.

Yet are these words meaningless, or spiritually pointless, even for those who could not expound the doctrine of the two natures?

It may be argued that, even if men truly understood the meaning of the Trinity or of the creed, some would still reject it. That is true, but it is only a reminder that matters of theological substance can never be solved merely by a change of language. Why should we hesitate to say that certain kinds of language can only be understood in the context of a certain experience of God and of Jesus Christ? Where this is lacking, the language of faith will always

seem mysterious, if not nonsense. However, we do not need to press this point too far. Modern philosophers are discussing the question of how dialogue is possible between the believer and the unbeliever, if both sides do not understand in the same way the meaning of the key terms used. While I agree that certain nuances of meaning in Christian language will be lost on the unbeliever, it is not true to say that the unbeliever can have no understanding at all of what a Christian means when he uses the word 'God.' Significant dialogue between believers and unbelievers is in fact going on in the contemporary world. The growing debate between Marxists and Christians, in which M. Roger Garaudy is a key figure on the Marxist side, shows that such dialogue is possible. The difficulty for the unbeliever lies not only in the language, but in a different interpretation of the force of the evidence for belief in God, which to the Christian seems compelling.

In one of the documents circulated at the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches, it is said that 'worship needs no more justification than does love.' We know what the framers of this statement mean. They wish to assert the intrinsic and self-evidencing quality of the Christian experience of prayer and of the presence of God. This is true for those who have responded in a certain way to Christ. In another sense, however, it is obvious that, for many reasons, it is not true for countless people that worship needs no further justification. They lack at the moment the experience which would make worship significant, and therefore self-evident. Or they cannot interpret the experience which they have as pointing to God. But again, this is obviously not merely a question of language.

The World Council of Churches was encouraged to undertake a study of the symbols (including verbal symbols) used in worship. Some of these, it is asserted, are a hindrance to effective worship. Yet it is also recognized that symbols are indispensable media of communication, and that we must therefore find contemporary symbols which spring from the significant experiences of men alive today. This, however, is easier said than done. If Tillich is right in believing that religious symbols are not created by a deliberate act of will, but spring spontaneously from our response to revelatory events, then it is going to be extremely difficult to make a deliberate substitution of new symbols. This is most obvious in the case of the cross. No group of Christians got together and deliberately selected this as the Christian symbol. It sprang from the historic actuality of the cross and from what Christians discovered there of the mercy and judgment of God. The pictorial symbol of the risen and triumphant Christ, as shown in the Sunderland tapestry of the new Coventry cathedral, sprang from the original apostolic experience of Christ alive after his death, and from the continuous experience since that time of his risen power. It is difficult to see how such symbols as these can ever be eliminated, if the Christian faith is not to be emasculated and stripped of its basic convictions. We may have a great deal of explaining to do to make these symbols fully meaningful. It is doubtful, however, that any adequate substitute symbols could be found.

When we come to physical symbols, the matter is somewhat different. In relation to the Eucharist or Lord's Supper, bread and wine, as physical realities, are what Professor Urban would have called 'extrinsic' symbols.³ No direct inspection of bread and wine would tell us about the meaning of the death of Christ, unless the latter had been a real event and the disciples had witnessed Jesus' use of these common elements of daily life in the world they knew. Is it, therefore, possible, to replace bread with rice, which Arnold Toynbee once suggested would have been used if Christianity had originated in the Far East? Or would it matter if we followed the 'experimental church liturgy' of some of our young people and substituted Coke for wine? The fact that the psychological inhibitions against doing this are so strong for many of us does not of itself decide the question. If we understand properly the significance of the death of Jesus, then perhaps a wide range of physical symbols might be selected.

The problem, however, is by no means easy. Coke, for example, is not a necessity of life on the physical level – even for all those under seventeen. It is not a particularly forceful symbol of that without which men could not possibly live. Bread and rice are obviously better candidates, if we want to suggest that the crucified and risen Jesus is as vital to our spiritual lives and destiny as these two staple articles of diet. It is difficult to dogmatize. Young people might argue that one potent sign of the fellowship they have together is the bottle of Coke. But can this sign be universalized in a way which would make it an effective symbol for Christians everywhere? Furthermore, does that matter?

To return to language, what shall we say of the increasing use of 'You' in place of 'Thou' when addressing God? If the use of 'You' among theological students in the seminaries continues at the present rate, 'Thou' will have disappeared from our worship in another generation, except for those of us who are survivors of a bygone age. To some this will seem an obvious and long overdue change. 'Thou' is no longer part of our living speech, except in religious worship. Thus its use only helps – so it is contended – to give the impression that religion has to do with a world where real people no longer live. Yet is the issue as simple as that even here? There is the purely psychological question: does the use of 'You' give people today, especially young people, a more vivid awareness of the reality and presence of God? If so, this would justify its use. On the other hand, the fact that 'Thou' is not part of our daily speech may be a useful reminder that, when addressing God, we are not simply speaking to another person in the literal sense of the word. God may be personal, but he is not a person in the sense of being exactly like another human. Is the use of 'You' a reflection of modern doubt about the transcendence of the living God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth? Or does it simply express a desire to be 'chummy' with God? It is difficult to be certain. Perhaps the only appropriate comment to those who address God as 'You' is an adaptation of a remark of Jesus, recorded in the *Codex Bezae*, to the man

3. Cf. Wilbur M. Urban, *Language and Reality* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939), pp. 401ff.

working on the Sabbath: 'Blessed art thou if thou knowest what thou doest.'

What conclusion can we draw from our discussion of language and liturgy? I must content myself here with a few dogmatic statements, in the hope that they may provoke fruitful reflection upon this important theme.

- 1 Words as such are not sacred. There are no 'sacred' languages, not even Hebrew and Greek. It is the meaning which language conveys which is vital. Whether the same meaning can be adequately expressed in many different linguistic forms cannot be decided a priori, but must be discovered in experience as Christian men seek to communicate with each other and to proclaim the gospel to the unbeliever.
- 2 A radical substitution of new language for that of the Bible or the traditional liturgical forms will not, of itself, necessarily solve the problem of enabling modern men to understand better the import of the gospel. This is not to say that experiment is forbidden; it is rather a warning not to over-estimate what a new language can do.
- 3 Modern man's difficulties with the gospel are primarily a matter, not of words, but of the nature of theological truth and the evidence for it. What evidence is there for a holy and loving God who cares for his children one by one? How can this belief be reconciled with evil, both natural and moral – with sin, suffering, and death? Do we really know anything for certain about Jesus, and if we do, does what we know justify us in calling him divine and accepting him as our ultimate authority for life? Can men view the world through the eyes of science and still believe that Jesus could rise from the dead? This is the kind of question that inhibits faith and makes worship difficult.

Changes of language will not of themselves solve these tormenting problems for us.

In my judgment, therefore, the basic question concerns the truth of the gospel. Once we have clarified this issue, we are free to experiment with all kinds of language, with symbols verbal and non-verbal, to make Christian truth relevant to men in changing cultural situations. If, however, we do not know what Christian truth is – if the gospel itself is a problem rather than an answer to our problems – then radical changes of language may only hide the poverty and confusion of our belief.

Any church musician will tell you what good church music is, but the kind

2 GODFREY RIDOUT

Orpheus in Ecclesia, or, The Riven Lute

When I undertook to write this piece I thought that, if I did not know all the answers, I knew enough to write an article. Now I am convinced that I do not know any answers at all, only a lot of questions.

Any church musician will tell you what good church music is, but the kind