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GLORIFYING GOD IN WORSHIP

FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2017

MIKE PARKER

‘Contemporary worship must become more concerned with being overwhelmed by the glory of God than with self-fulfilment.’

As we’ve considered what it means to be ‘Reforming Tomorrow’s Church Today,’ we’ve encountered the majesty of God, the movement of the Holy Spirit, the challenge of globalisation, the good news of the reality of final judgement, and the imperative of united Christian witness. They all find their focus in worship.

Working in the Middle East, I’ve become acutely aware that Western versions of the Christmas story don’t entirely tally with Gospel texts.¹ Some years ago I heard of an Islamic nativity performed in a northern English school. There was one very revealing difference between this and the usual fayre. In the final cameo, *no-one bowed to the baby*.

Proskuneo (bowing down in reverence, approaching to kiss), is the most common New Testament word for worship and is regularly used to describe believing responses to God and Christ. Both Matthew and Luke end their Gospels with the disciples *worshipping* the risen Christ (Matt. 28:9 & 17; Luke 24:52). Matthew leaves room for questions as Jesus sends his friends out to *make disciples of all nations*. Luke has them *worshipping*, then *returning to Jerusalem with great joy*, with a new focus on Christ and eager to embark on daily life again.²

This worship is at the heart of Christian witness to families, neighbours, colleagues and contemporaries, and is what got the first Christians into such trouble. Can you honour Caesar’s regime while at the same time declaring there’s someone greater? Christian leaders in the early centuries

¹ Among Kenneth Bailey’s incisive insights after over forty years in the Middle East is ‘The Manger & the Inn’, in the Fall 2007 issue of ‘Bible & Spade’ magazine. His observations are summarised in Part 1 of *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (London: SPCK, 2008). His Nativity play script, faithful to both text and culture, is *Open Hearts in Bethlehem – A Christmas Drama* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013).

² Larry Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), identifies early Christian worship of Jesus in chapter 3. Church is shaped by intimacy, participation, fervour, significance, potency, prayer, asking for forgiveness, baptism as new people join, gathering for the Lord’s Supper, songs/hymns, and prophetic speech.

were constantly trying to show how their people were more reliable citizens because of their loyalty to Christ.³

Christians living in majority Muslim countries face the same challenge, and their leaders encourage them to engage even as they face growing pressure over religious choices, politics, economics and security. In a self-interested world, Middle East remainers wanting to be biblical Christians recognise they're called to go beyond themselves, to serve and work among people of all faiths and none. They have a lot to say to us, caught in our recent Western bubble of safety, security, controllability and a life of choice and consumption. As global population grows and balances shift, change is coming, as it has come before.⁴

Five hundred years ago, a massive change came to both church and society in one part of the world. We'll explore how questions asked then can steer church life and witness now; we'll take a brief journey to a major church that was never reformed but is being renewed; and we'll consider where we can join in with another twenty-first century reformation.

FIRST, REFORMATION ASKS QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR WORSHIP

In five of the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3, Christ critiques churches which are too like their surrounding cultures. His final vision is people from every nation, tribe and time gathered around the Lamb who is the Lion and united in worship, yet our experience this side of heaven falls short.

Luke quickly flags up the reality as Jesus continues *to do and teach* through Acts (1:1). By chapter 5, despite early successes we meet Ananias and Sapphira, seeking self-fulfilment by cheating the church, attempting to deceive the community and the Holy Spirit. In chapter 6 ethnic disputes over aid provision endanger the church's witness and ministry. I'm convinced Luke is deliberate, keen to head off any dichotomy between following Jesus and involvement with his church.⁵

³ Alan Kreider, 'Patience in the Missional Thought and Practice of the Early Church: The Case of Cyprian of Carthage', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol 39:4, October 2015.

⁴ Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016) captures the against-the-tide nature of twenty-first century worship. David W. Smith's *Against the Stream* (Leicester: IVP, 2003) teases out the implications for us.

⁵ The best question we were asked in training for Anglican Ordination was by John Wesson: 'Can you find or design a Gospel outline that takes the church seriously?' We couldn't in the mid-1980s, though outlines are slowly bring-

Luke shows us we are called to be part of this church, a mixed bunch the wrong side of heaven, God's work-in-progress. As our conference will affirm, God sees and can be trusted to judge justly; we are called to take radical action to keep keeping the church on track, no more so than in what we call public worship. *'Contemporary worship must become more concerned with being overwhelmed by the glory of God than with self-fulfilment.'*

In Reformation Europe the presenting issue was assurance of salvation, which had steadily been prised from the grasp of ordinary believers and placed into the hands of professional religious people. Much of the wrestling concerns what we do when we meet. As Luther leads his first Mass on Cantate Sunday, 3rd April 1507, he's not just nervous about doing and saying the right things in the right way, leaving things out, or fumbling the elements. He's utterly daunted by what the service *means* and whether he is worthy to be *involved* in it, never mind *lead it*.⁶ The encounter and the journey that followed becomes the engine for continuing reformation. In danger of being crushed by uncertainty, he recovers the biblical understanding that God is the one on the move, entering our world, revealing his grace, sending his Son to die for us, coming to rescue us. We receive first, then respond.

Luther's church had thrown this into reverse, replacing assurance with uncertainty and God's grace with human duty. Church systems were keeping God distant, exhausting people to the point where they were willing to pay the religious to pray for them. Professionals were apparently closer to God; maybe they had better and more effective access to him. Luther countered, a brilliant and compulsive communicator, using informal and contemporary language, 'short, clear and direct, speaking not only to his professional peers but to the wider Christian people'.⁷

In talking with the Samaritan woman in John 4, Jesus turns things round to redefine worship. Her poor choices, five husbands plus one, mean she's living in the shadow of shame. While others wisely hide from

ing church in from the footnote at the end to being an integral part of God's picture.

⁶ A moment well captured by Thomas Lindsay's *Martin Luther* (Tain: Christian Focus, 2004), p. 37.

⁷ Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, (New York: Penguin, 2016), p. 5: 'In an age that valued prolonged and detailed exposition, complexity, and repetition, it was astonishing that Luther should have instinctively discerned the value of brevity. Luther in effect invented a new form of theological writing, short, clear, and direct [...] This revelation of style, purpose, and form was at the heart of the Reformation.' 'Among friends and relaxed [...] he] sometimes spoke to shock, and delighted in the outrageous' (p. 4).

the sun, she braves the heat of the day to avoid them and be alone at the well. Jesus asks for her help, and is stimulated by her conversation. Talking to her at all is culturally risky. Worship is the topic. What he says to her is completely unexpected: 'The hour is coming when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him' (John 4:23). 'Seeking' is flipped from its usual meaning of people looking for things, even God, to describe Almighty God, out and about, searching every bush and scrub, turning over every stone, determined to see if there's anyone ready and willing to worship him.⁸

To someone with a confused Jewish framework, as to someone from a Muslim background for whom God is only greater and not close to us and assurance is presumption, this is dynamite. God takes the initiative and comes looking for you. He provides the ultimate way through his Christ, and you can know you are welcome in his presence.

In England, the first two years of Thomas Cranmer's reform programme were focussed on common preaching, with twelve Homilies to be repeated in Anglican churches every quarter. As that foundation was being laid, Cranmer revised the liturgy, in particular the Eucharist. His Prayer Books of 1549 and 1552 reversed the direction of the service from an offering *to* God to receiving *from* God and *responding* to his mercy and grace.⁹ Ashley Null has shown Cranmer's notes were influenced by the Alexandrian fathers' 'affective reading of Scripture', which expected God's word to warm hearts and shape wills.¹⁰ Cranmer's theology was essentially devotional, like R. A. Finlayson's and Douglas MacMillan's who both exhibited a beautiful combination of depth and warmth.

⁸ H. G. Link in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), Volume 3, p. 532 — the word *zetein* 'includes God's claim to the fruits of obedience (Luke 13:6, the fig tree), to true worship (John 4:23), to faithful stewardship (1 Cor. 4:2) [...] also the dedicated pursuit of the Son of man whose mission it is to seek that which is lost and rescue it (Luke 19:10).'

⁹ Rowan Williams, 'Faith and Worship', Prayer Book Society, p. 80: 'When we look at some of the prefatory material of the Book of Common Prayer, we find in the little essay "Of Ceremonies" this very simple definition of what's going on in public worship: "to declare and set forth Christ's benefits unto us".'

¹⁰ Lecture to celebrate the opening of the Alexandria School of Theology's new premises in February 2017: 'When I say "affective reading", I mean that reading of Scripture should move the affections, the motions, one's deep-seated longings.' See Ashley Null & John W Yates ed, *Reformation Anglicanism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), where Null reflects on the 'Reformers' favorite verb to use with the gospel: allure' (p. 107f).

John Knox shared these concerns, weighing in to revise the Communion service and insisting on the church's right to choose its own leaders.¹¹ Fast forward to the 19th century Disruption, where again the trigger was who chooses church leaders. David Drummond, founding Rector of St Thomas's Episcopal Church in Edinburgh, was part of that movement and is seen in David Octavius Hill's Disruption Portrait. The network of English Episcopalians he led used the English Prayer book, rejecting Scottish communion liturgies as being in practice too Catholic.¹²

The Reformation was thus a recovery of a biblical view of worship. We're agreed with Augustine and Karl Barth and a host of others on the need for our churches to be continually reformed, and thus to keep examining and adjusting our worship. There are vigorous social media debates between musicians, sound managers, and church leaders, and struggles continue in almost every congregation around 'the dualisms: authenticity versus performance; music as immersion versus accompaniment; education versus encounter; information versus adoration.' These are not so much choices; they are all to be pursued because we are whole people, thinking, feeling, deciding people, and God meets us at every level.¹³

We need to look back through the Reformation to the beginning, as David Smith urges: 'A church confronting the world that lives after Christendom might anticipate discovering useful parallels and principles in the experience of the church that existed *before* Christendom.'¹⁴

While these conversations are 'out there', Reformation principles urge us to get in on the conversation, in three areas:

1. Direction: What's communicated about God? How are we knowing God better?

A few years ago, the leader of the largest Presbyterian church in Egypt commented: 'Everyone believes in God. The question is, what is God like?' Every service and event starts and goes somewhere, and takes a route. We come together, we give thanks and praise, we hear God's word, we respond in prayer for ourselves and the world, we receive bread and wine,

¹¹ R. G. Kyle, 'Knox, John', *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), p. 465f.

¹² Patricia Meldrum, *Conscience and Compromise* (Exeter: Paternoster 2006) researches the story thoroughly and movingly, especially as it impinges on church plants and communion today.

¹³ I'm indebted to Mark Cameron, Worship Director at St Paul's & St George's Church, Edinburgh for these insights.

¹⁴ *Mission After Christendom* (London: DLT, 2003), p. 124.

we rejoice and prepare to send one another out.¹⁵ Our needs are met, as we understand how God is able to welcome us, as we stand within the bigger picture of who God is, why it's best to follow him, and what our role is in his new community. This is the big picture, within which other aspects of worship take their place. Sometimes it is overwhelming.

Contemporary worship believes God is at work among us while music plays. More than singing, it creates an atmosphere, sometimes loud and exultant, sometimes quiet and reflective, assuring us God is with us, opening us to be ready to hear the word of the Lord. This kind of worship usually carries with it the conviction that God speaks in a variety of ways. Our appeal is for the Word to be the governing, controlling framework for discerning the voice and call of God. When we say 'We welcome you Lord,' he's already here, ahead of us. 'We acknowledge you Lord' would be better, or 'We're ready to hear.' God speaks, we hear and follow.

2. Participation: What's our part in this?

The Reformation's reaction to Priestcraft is all too easily replaced by other controllers of worship. Is the worship leader closer to God? Or the projectionist? — PowerPoint is designed to make sure you understand what you are being told, rather than foster interaction. Or the pastor-teacher? Will Storrar concluded that 'the Scottish Christ is the minister.'¹⁶

Though we may sometimes feel distant and unsure what's happening and where it's going, we're all involved, and we all have a view. Leading worship is a difficult and exposed ministry; let's encourage those who write songs and lead them. Let's raise the game from 'I like this song or that...' to talk about how songs help us understand scripture and reinforce its application. We're not just looking, tuning in and out, watching (and critiquing) a performance. We're involved. Scottish Reformation churches have us sitting together round the table, the platform, encouraging one another to hear and respond to the word of God.

Which gets us thinking about language. What we do often undermines what we say, as evidenced by the persistent confusion in our language: 'A time of worship' still mostly means singing; we talk about 'church community' while sitting in rows; we hear a message on relationships with songs about me.¹⁷

¹⁵ David Peterson's summary in the Epilogue to *Engaging with God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992).

¹⁶ From the video that came with his book *Scottish Identity* (Edinburgh: Hand-sel, 1990).

¹⁷ My colleague in Beirut, Perry Shaw, researched the hidden curriculum — the gap between what we say and what we do. See his *Transforming Theological Education* (Carlisle: Langham Global, 2014).

Living a few years in Egypt's corporate culture has left me struggling with the 'me, my, I' language of so much of our singing and speaking. We sing what we believe and we believe what we sing. Athanasius of Alexandria doggedly defeated Arius, but it was an uphill struggle as Arius was a musician. He had the songs, and he nearly won the day.

I realise many classic nineteenth century hymns are individual (though Luther's sixteenth century 'Ein Feste Burg' is not). Yet when you're a minority, what matters is to know you're not alone and that others stand with you. Most of the yous in the New Testament are plural, and native English-speakers mostly miss them.¹⁸ To involve all of us, some leaders know how to weave scripture in to support the theme, steer the songs, and strengthen our encounter with God. Others are good at bringing in people's stories of how their faith has come alive and grown, deepening our appreciation of what God is doing.

Individualism, as the American management guru Tom Peters might say, is the unintended consequence of the Reformation's emphasis on personal responsibility. Marva Dawn's questions from Psalm 96 would help us push back and find places to talk together.¹⁹ What are we singing and how? What idols distract us? How does creation help us appreciate and respond to the greatness of God? How is our character transformed? How do we understand evangelism and God's sovereignty? And how are we being formed by the future to live in the present?

3. Outcome: Where is this taking us?

As we leave this gathering and this place, what impression about God and ourselves and our world are we taking with us? How are we changing? How do we see what we're called to do and be? How will we glorify God through the rest of our time?

We assume Western language is universal, but other global strands are significant. I offer a brief reflection on the historic Egyptian church, which never had a reformation but which is definitely renewing.

Egyptian Christians use different language from us; they are more likely to ask 'Where do you pray?' than 'Where do you worship?' In a 90% Muslim nation, the Coptic Church is 90% of the Christians and has played a vital part since the apostle Mark's arrival. We're the latecomers;

¹⁸ David Smith wonders if 'To judge from the lyrics of songs sung in churches across the Western world, the whole drama of the incarnation, of cross and resurrection, was designed to meet individuals' needs for comfort and reassurance.' *Liberating the Gospel* (London: DLT, 2016), p. 188.

¹⁹ Marva Dawn, *How Shall We Worship? Biblical Guidelines for the Worship Wars* (republished by Christians Equipped for Ministry, 2015).

it's very moving to be where the Lord's people have been from the beginning.

That said, Coptic church is formal, with robes and candles and acolytes and priests and Mary and saints. It seems somehow to have missed Hebrews, and is thus a kind of Old Testament Christianity; most things are done to you and for you from the front. Yet their focus is Jesus, and there are four renewers at work in the Egyptian churches.

1. The Bible Societies are releasing and applying the Word of God

In Scotland the Bible is one of the least-read best-sellers. In Coptic culture, scripture is woven in to the fabric of public worship, known by memory and recitation and images. The previous Pope, Shenouda III, had memorised scripture and held weekly Wednesday question and teaching evenings attended by five thousand in St Mark's Cathedral. Ramez Atallah, General Secretary of the Bible Society of Egypt, describes 'an insatiable appetite for the scriptures' such that he and his colleagues can hardly keep up. Bible Societies have taken a lead to respond to crises, boldly and imaginatively opening up conversations and answering questions. Biblica/IBS Egypt publish a red-letter Gospel of Luke, not with Jesus' words highlighted but explaining words and concepts Muslims find difficult to understand.

2. There's a strong commitment to young people's ministry

Though once under suspicion, the Bible Society is now warmly welcome at Coptic festivals, whole weeks where they're free to teach and explain scripture to young people especially.

The church has a Bishop for Youth, and sponsors multiple camps and training events.²⁰ Protestant churches also host conferences, sports camps, prayer events, and there is a growing youth Alpha movement. These streams have led to an explosion of authentic music and song, using contemporary language and Arabic rhythms.²¹

3. The rhythm of retreat is being normalised

Coptic Bishops come from the Monasteries, and many Copts take their families to visit relatives who are monks. Church groups and Christian

²⁰ Documented in German by Wolfran Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche*, Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte (1998).

²¹ Among my current favourites are 'Emmanuel' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjEehbjIAY>> and 'Zeedo el-Maseeh' (Praise Jesus more): <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWYiS8i5RiA>>. All web addresses valid in May 2018.

agencies have invested massively in out-of-town retreat centres. The rhythm of withdrawing and engaging, church gathered and church scattered, has been strengthened by this movement.

4. Responding to the Uprising and the failure of the Arab Spring

The 2011 Uprising brought Christian leaders together in common witness to the state. Church leaders have challenged their members to recognize God's hand in the resulting people movements, and they're learning to respond and reach out. At the same time, in the light of the present tensions, fighting between Muslim factions in the region and the global rise of violent extremism, Muslims are questioning their inherited faith as never before. In a culture where questioning is disloyalty, churches are engaging.²²

Bishop Mouneer Anis of Egypt encourages all his congregations and agencies to witness boldly to a majority Muslim society as they share their faith, study and learn to know their faith, and show their faith in practice. His friend Richard Chartres, recently retired Bishop of London, visited Egyptian clergy and spoke about growing churches which are 'Unafraid to question, and unashamed to adore.'²³

WHAT DOES CONTEMPORARY REFORMATION LOOK LIKE?

To return to Scotland. In addition to the requirement to keep reviewing our public worship, there's another reformation going on, reflecting the second strand of the Reformation five hundred years ago. Calvin's concern was for the interface between belief and behaviour, the personal and the public. Much of his writing was done while shaping and developing city life. This is worship in its widest sense.²⁴

²² An incisive treatment is Mindy Betz, *They Say We Are Infidels* (Tyndale, 2016). David Garrison's *A Wind in the House of Islam* researches the shifts currently taking place (Monument, CO: Wigtake Resources, 2014). Brother Andrew with Al Janssen give insights from inside in *Secret Believers* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2007).

²³ See his fascinating Lambeth Lecture, 1st October 2015, about the transformation of the London scene: <<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-and-writing/speeches/bishop-london-delivers-lambeth-lecture-church-growth-capital>>. The Diocese of London lists its priorities: to be more confident in speaking and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ, more compassionate in serving communities with the love of God the Father; and more creative in reaching new people and places in the power of the Spirit.

²⁴ As a school chaplain in the 1990s I remember sitting through a School Board dominated by discussions about buses and dog excrement and wondering

If the original Reformation was about giving the Word of God back to ordinary Christians, this present reformation is about returning worship and ministry to the people of God. A major catalyst is the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, fruit of John Stott's determination to engage scripture in one hand with the world in the other. Mark Greene has led and developed this quiet revolution to recover biblical witness. Mission Scotland fostered it and brought Mark here, and it is being welcomed throughout the country.

Mark calls it 'whole life Christianity'. At the first major conference at Stirling University, we were all given a badge 'FTCW', to signal that every one of us is a 'Full-Time Christian Worker.' This demolishes the destructive sacred-secular divide with its notion that what happens on church premises is somehow more important to God than what happens elsewhere. It gives people their heads and hearts back, helping them live integrated lives and overcome their sense of uncertainty about where work and witness fit in to God's purposes. Exodus 31 describes Bezalel, the first person in scripture to be *filled with the Spirit*, who with his colleague Oholiab used craft gifts to make a beautiful space for God and people to meet. Your workplace, your 'frontline', can be the same.²⁵

Peter Neilson showed me some years ago that this kind of integrated life is deeply embedded in Scottish spirituality, as in David Wilkie's 1837 painting 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'. Here is a household who live, work and play together, meeting round God's word as they prepare for Sunday. The light in the picture comes solely from the pages of the Bible.²⁶

This is about recovering the priesthood of all believers and redefining ministry. I've been urging LICC to take this global, especially to younger Arab Christians in cultures where the only models on offer are priesthood or working for Christian organisations. Bishop Mouneer wants something like 'As you leave this place, your worship begins' on the inside of

what I was doing there. At the time I read Alister McGrath's *A Cloud of Witnesses* (Leicester: IVP, 1990) and realised that the proper place to do theology was while building a city, in all its dimensions.

²⁵ From Mark Greene, *Thank God It's Monday* (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 1994) to the 'Imagine how we can reach the UK' project, to Mark Greene, *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* (Leicester: IVP 2014), LICC continues to resource this reformation. The week following this lecture, 'Whole Life Worship' was launched, with a book of the same title by Sam & Sara Hargreaves (Leicester, IVP 2017) and with a 'Journey Pack' of videos and Bible Studies. <www.licc.org.uk> has the details.

²⁶ Burn's poem and Wilkie's picture are together at: <http://www.robertburns.org.uk/Assets/Poems_Songs/cotters_saturday_night.htm>.

Cairo Cathedral's doors. As a dynamic strategy for reaching our nation, this is indeed to the glory of God.

Mark Greene's favourite benchmark character is more prosaic: it's Bond, James Bond.

Wherever Bond goes on mission, he is briefed, trained, resourced and supported. For what?

Your character, your opportunities and your impact as you go about your life.

Which adds a final question to our list: if this, in the language of Romans 12, is true spiritual worship, our reasonable service, whole-life worship, and if each of us is actually an FTCW, how does what we do in our churches and groups equip us to engage with the world and our calling to be God's witnesses in it? What does it mean for every member of our congregations to be 'briefed, trained, resourced, supported'?

The key challenge for our churches is to re-set our public worship around God, ourselves and the world we live in, and to equip people for their work and witness so they go out and 'Thank God it's Monday.' We want to learn to acknowledge, affirm and support every ministry. As we recover biblical views of worship, we reform our minds, we review our language, and we re-set our priorities.

I've offered four questions to keep checking we're on the right lines when we meet. Our biggest desire is to honour the glory of God. Glory has the meaning of weight, the heaviness of holiness, the serious joy of purity. It has depth and joy. As Eric Liddell said, 'God made me fast. And when I run, I feel God's pleasure.' With the glory of God our focus, we find true self-fulfilment, because we are thus connected to God, to his people, to his world. Our reformation vision of worship is that we become who we are, the people God intended us to be.