

The Worshipping Church
Isaiah 6:1-8; John 4:21-24; I Cor. 14:26

I love worship... in almost every form. I'm a worship junkie. Whether it is in a cathedral or a store-front, high church or low church, put me there and I am happy. I love the worship at Grace Baptist too, how open and free and participatory it is.

Today, I will offer a bird's-eye view of the meaning of Christian worship, its essential form and deep structures...Hold on tight! Here we go!

I
An Elemental Order of True Worship

Isaiah's encounter with god in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-8) gives us an elemental order of the experience of God in worship.

First, there is the experience of awe and praise: the seraphim singing

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts,

The whole earth is full of His glory.

Secondly, there is confession and cleansing:

“Woe is me. For I am lost; For I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”

In the awe before God Isaiah experiences himself as unclean and cries out in confession.

Then the cleansing and purification. A seraphim touches Isaiah's lips with a burning coal and says: your guilt is taken away; your sin is forgiven.

Thirdly there is the Word of God: “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?”

Fourthly, the human response: “Here I am; send me.”

Here is the deep structure of worship. Most Christian worship retains these elements.

II Second Century Practice of Worship

The first description of early Christian worship comes from Justin Martyr, about 150 C.E.. Here it is:

...And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit, and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.

Any responses? What parts of worship there correspond to worship here?

III The Criteria For Worship

When Jesus met the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well, near Mount Gerizim, she asks a question which reflected controversy and division between Jews and Samaritans: Where are we to worship? In Jerusalem or on Mt. Gerizim, the Samaritan holy place of worship? Implicit in the question was not only where to worship, but how to worship. Jesus answered:

The hour is coming when neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father....The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father

in Spirit and in truth... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

Worship is not confined to a particular holy place: the whole world is an altar to God, the dwelling place of god. You can worship anywhere, any time. The criteria is that it be done in Spirit and in truth. In the Spirit of God and in utter truthfulness, as best as we can know the truth.

IV Corinthian Worship

Paul describes free-wheeling worship in Corinth. It depicts what I call “Corinthian Worship”, built around the spiritual gifts of the members of the community:

What then, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.

Everyone came with a gift to offer to the congregation in worship. It was highly participatory. The word for worship, *liturgy*, means literally “the work of the people”. We are all involved actively in worship.

Here is something I love about worship at Grace Baptist: You are all so active in the leading of worship. And you do it so well! Leading in the Call to Worship and Invocation, in the offering of sacred music through the choir, soloists and instrumentalists, in the reading of scripture and the readers’ choir, in the offering of concerns and celebrations, in the various calls to service in the community and in strong congregational singing. It all delights and amazes me. Which leads to the next section:

IV Kierkegaard: A New Way of Envisioning Worship

Soren Kierkegaard said that most people come to worship with the wrong idea about worship. They compare it to going to the theatre: the congregation is the audience, the worship leaders are the actors on stage, and God is the prompter hidden off stage helping the actors say their right lines.

But instead, in true worship: *God* is the audience, the congregation are the actors and the worship leaders are the prompters helping the congregation say their right lines to God.

This is a profound re-ordering of how we think about worship. God is the true audience, we the people are the actors, and the worship leaders help us bring our true and whole selves before God and say what we most want and need to say.

For example public prayer is not private prayer made public- “Lord, I’ve had a lousy week this week”- it is prayer that helps the congregation offer their prayers to God.

Well, what do we most want and need to say to God? For this we turn to our next section:

VI The Self in Worship: A Classical Order of Worship.

This classical order builds upon the elemental structure in Isaiah’s experience in the temple.

1. The Doxological Self. The first movement in worship: Praising, Thanking, Blessing, Awe and Delight.

The opening movement of worship is Praise. There is *expressive* praise, praise that shouts and sings its praise in sound, rhythm and words. *Alleluia!* Which literally means Praise Ya! Or Praise Yahweh!

Then there is *contemplative praise*; adoration in a cooler mode. It ponders, why do I love thee, O God, and praise Thee? I love Thee and praise Thee because...

In Hebrew and Christian worship it is *thankful* praise, what the Hebrew language calls *brarakah*, or blessing. We bless the Lord. It should have an element of delight: delighting in God and God’s world as God delights in us.

There is also awe before the holy presence of God as we stand before the mystery, vastness, righteousness and goodness of God. We feel the distance and difference between God the creator and us, the creature. Which leads to the second movement in worship:

2. The Un-Defended Self: The Self in Confession and Lamentation.

We live such *defended* lives. Defending ourselves, our actions and attitudes. It is such an exhausting exercise.

Confession is that moment in worship when with huge relief we can be honest, honest with ourselves and God. We let down the defenses and let our real, unvarnished selves pour themselves out to God, with all our need, sadness, regret, confusion and sin.

It is about the ways we wound ourselves, others and the world. It is about the ways we betray our own best values and the way of God.

But the movement of the undefended self is also lamentation. It deals with finitude and fear, life's pain and tragedy cruelty and loss. It is about human limitation and what Uramuro called "the common weeping".

3. The Dialogical Self, the self in dialogue with God. The third movement in worship.

In classical worship language, this is the *Service of the Word*. Here we have the reading of scripture. In the Iona community after scripture is read the people say:

For the Word of God in scripture

For the Word of God among us

For the Word of God within us

Thanks be to God.

Then comes the sermon which seeks to interpret and apply the scripture for today.

We need a word "outside us" Bonhoeffer said, lest our lives become an echo chamber of the self-enclosed self. But this word from beyond is also near us, "in our mouths and in our hearts: (to quote Deuteronomy 30:14). So we have this internal dialogue, conversation with God.

4. The fourth movement is *the Response-able Self*.

We respond to God's word and Spirit. In most churches here is the time for the *Prayers* and the *Offering*.

So let me say a word here about the *Self in Intercession*. Intercessory prayer is an act of love as we pray for ourselves, each other and the needs of the world. Rowan Williams says that intercessory prayer is simply thinking of someone or something in the presence of God. The one prayed for, the one being prayed for and God become one as points in a sacred triangle.

Williams says that intercessory prayer dares to believe that God and the world belong together and that there is not place where the love of God cannot go.

5. The next movement of worship in most Christian churches is the *Service of the Table*.

The Eucharistic Self, where we come to Christ's Table, receive Christ in the bread and wine and are nourished by the Spirit of God.

Most Protestant churches make too little of the Service of the Table and celebrate it too seldom. It is the spiritual nourishment of the people of God: the gifts of God for the people of God. I hunger for it every Sunday.

6. Worship closes with the *Apostolic Self*- the Sending Forth in Blessing.

"Apostle" means someone who is sent. The close of worship is a sending forth of the people of God on mission to be Christ to the world. The minister and the choir offer the benediction. We go with Jesus' promise: "Lo, I am with you always."

"Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" God said to Isaiah. "Here am I, send me", answered Isaiah. The Apostolic Self

Conclusion

I close with a story. It comes from a short story by Andre Debus. It tells of a stable owner named Luke Ripley who has discovered an essential morning routine. He'd wake before dawn to feed the horses and spend an hour in meditation and conversation with God. Then he'd make breakfast and ride his horse to the local Catholic Church and have communion with the priest and a few regulars.

He said this morning routine had taught him in his words, “The necessity and wonder of ritual.” And here is how he described it. Ritual, he says,

“Allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual (and here is the metaphor) as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.”

Our tongues are so tied, our hearts so fickle, but this is what worship gives us: It gives us our ceremony of love.