

WORSHIP: EVANGELISM, PRAISE OR ENCOUNTER WITH GOD?

(Address to the Annual Meeting of the Society, May 1977)

For a long time, the study of Christian worship has been regarded with suspicion by theologians of all denominations.

Karl Barth once wrote that the dictum *Lex orandi, lex credendi* was 'one of the most intelligent things that have ever been said about method in theology'.¹ I wholeheartedly agree, of course. At the same time, I am obliged to say that very often the bad image which liturgiologists have won for themselves is fully deserved and justified. Theology and liturgy have been forcibly divorced for too long: for just as long, in some cases, as liturgiology has been divorced from the living faith of our congregations.

Protestants and Catholics

Protestants and Catholics have quarrelled for centuries on the subject of worship. From the moment in which Luther wrote that 'the only ceremony and the only exercise of cult which Christ instituted is the sermon',² most Protestants have insisted that worship is fundamentally evangelism, and that its purpose is 'to keep the faithful devout'.³ With very few exceptions, most Catholics 'on the contrary' have insisted that worship is fundamentally praise of God expressed in the words and the gestures appointed in the liturgical books.⁴ For a long time, for Protestants and Catholics alike, the real nourishment for one's spiritual life did not come from the liturgy as such, but from other sources: the reading and study of the Bible for Protestants; meditation and astatic practices for Catholics. By Protestants and Catholics alike, worship and spiritual growth were largely understood only at the level of the psychological and the subjective. It is interesting to compare, in this respect, the works of the Reformers with books such as the *Exercidatorio de la vida spiritual* of Garcia de Cisneros or the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola.

The Lutheran liturgiologist R. Staehlin, writing about the liturgical reformation of his own Church, says that 'much was destroyed and much was lost', and that all that remained was a collection of 'museum pieces'.⁵ Nothing much was lost, and nothing at all was destroyed in the token liturgical reformation which followed the Council of Trent, but we can certainly say that all that remained there as well was a collection — this time a

larger one — of museum pieces: ‘The liturgy of the Baroque period’, writes Abbot S. Marsili, ‘was the worthy daughter, touched up here and there, of the liturgy of the Middle Ages.’ It remained what it had been before: basically, a “show” which the people were ‘to watch from afar’.⁶

As one could gather from the last two quotations alone, in modern times the classic distinction between Protestants and Catholics on the subject of worship became somewhat blurred. By the first half of this century, Protestant and Catholic liturgiologists had much in common. In 1936, W. D. Maxwell could write that worship was ‘the outward expression of our homage and adoration when we are assembled in the presence of God’,⁷

I have much to quarrel with in this definition. I find it is based on two fundamental unquestioned assumptions:

1. that worship is primarily the action of man towards God, rather than the response of the whole Body of Christ, at one with its Head, to the *pre*-ceding man-ward activity of God; and,
2. that worship is limited to the words and gestures used by the community to express the individual feelings of its members when they gather together.

The pre-history of both assumptions goes back a long way in the history of the Church. The insistence on the psychological and the subjective, together with the idea of worship as fundamentally a God-ward activity of man had been the common legacy, to Protestants and Catholics alike, of the Modern Devotion movement. These two ideas were so firmly embedded in the general consciousness of the people, that not even the doctrine of the primacy of grace over law, newly rediscovered by the Reformers, was able to shift the emphasis on to more orthodox grounds to any permanent degree. The doctrine of the on-going priesthood of Christ and the doctrine of the mediation of the Spirit had somehow got lost in the process. Prof. J. B. Torrance’s article ‘Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland’ and the literature originated by the publication of A. J. Jungmann’s *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* throw invaluable light on the subject.⁸

Moreover, a decisive shift of emphasis in sacramental theology from the concept of the action of God in Christ through His Body — a concept which Thomas Aquinas unsuccessfully tried to re-establish⁹ — to the concept of an outward and visible sign, a *rite*, instituted by Christ for the purposes of ‘generating grace’, had already taken place at the time of Alger of Liège and of Hugh of St Victor, and had been re-enforced in the following century, by Peter Lombard, the true father of scholastic theology.¹⁰

The consequences of this long pre-history were, inevitably, a somewhat mutilated doctrine of the Church and the further assumption that worship, though connected with the salvation of the individual, was not directly connected with the 'missio' of Christ's Body on earth: for Protestants and Catholics alike, the final object of worship, understood either as evangelism or as praise, remained that of 'keeping the faithful devout' whilst improving their morals.

Evangelism and Praise

In his preface to the German Mass of 1526, Martin Luther wrote: 'In short, if we establish liturgical orders, it is not at all for those who are already Christians, for the latter have no need of them. Such orders, in fact, have no intrinsic justification; their justification is in us: we are yet not all Christians, and they are there to make Christians of us. Those who are Christians, perform their worship in spirit. [. . .] If such orders are necessary, it is especially because of simple-minded and young people, who need to be and must be daily educated and trained in Scripture and the Word of God, so that they may become accustomed to it, skilled and fluent in it, to the end that they may be able to bear witness to it, and in time be able to teach others and help to further the reign of Christ.'¹¹

The assumption is clear: worship is evangelism, a lesson directed to others and not something addressed to God: to worship in spirit really means not to have to worship at all.

The eighteenth-century rationalists, says von Allmen, seized on this idea of Luther's 'to justify their scorn for worship (except for children and those who remain children)'.¹² 'In their opinion,' von Allmen continues, 'true worship is seen much less in the liturgy than in a moral and honourable life and social works. We must make no mistake about it: this rationalistic idea in practice reflects the average opinion of Church members; to go to church is not an act of obedience, but the satisfaction of a need.'¹³ He then quotes Peter Brunner: 'He who sees the cult only as a means of furthering a missionary work not yet completed, uproots the cult, instead of giving it a basis. For, what proves the value of justifying the necessity of cult is that the justification remains valid even when, basically, the question of evangelisation can be considered as settled'.¹⁴ Von Allmen concludes: 'The sermon has tended to make us forget that the cult is not a lesson addressed to men, but rather praise addressed to God'.¹⁵

Who is right, and who is wrong? To answer this question, we must go back to the source. We must go back to the Scriptures.

Worship in the Old Testament

It has not as yet proved possible to reconstruct in detail the pre-deuteronomic theology of worship of the people of Israel.¹⁶

We can fortunately say, nevertheless, that by the time the priestly literature is completed and Malachi is accepted into the canon, the Old Testament affords us two contracting, if not diametrically opposed, views.

The first view is embodied in texts such as Num. 1: 48-54 and Ezek. 40: 44-46; 42: 13-14. In these texts, worship is seen as a cultic, ritual, priestly action, by persons of the highest rank specifically chosen by YHWH for the purpose — the levites, and, later, the priests — who perform the appointed ritual according to indispensable and absolute rules found in the Torah.

The second view is embodied in texts such as Ex. 19: 5-6; Deut. 10, 12; Is. 61, 6; Ps. 101, 6 and Mal. 3: 1-5. In these texts, worship is seen not as a ritual, cultic, priestly action, but as the royal priesthood of the whole People of God, expressed in concrete obedience to the voice of God in everyday life, and in faithfulness to the covenant.

It is very interesting in this respect to examine the way in which the Septuagint translated into Greek the two Hebrew verbs 'sarat' and 'abad', and their derivatives. As a rule, they used the word 'leitourgia' for the priestly ritual action of cult, and words such as 'douleia' and 'latreia' for the 'inferior' type of worship offered by the people.¹⁷ The Septuagint translators themselves, however, felt that they could not keep this distinction at all times: they did in Is. 56, 6 and 60: 7-10; they did not in Is. 61, 6 and Ps. 101, 6 and where they used for non-priestly worship the very technical terms they had otherwise reserved for the specialised cult of priests and levites.

Worship in the New Testament

A comparison between Mt. 21: 33-43, and Jer. 7: 25-26; Mt. 9, 13 and Hos. 6, 6; Mt. 21, 13 and Jer. 7, 11 (Is. 56, 7), seen in the light of Jn. 2: 18-21 and 4: 19-26, leaves us in no doubt as to which of the two available Old Testament understandings of worship Jesus favoured.

At his trial, Jesus may or may not have claimed to be literally the Son-of-God. He was certainly seen as an enemy of the Temple priests, to whom he quoted Mal. 3: 1-5 when he upset the money-changers' stalls. Mt. 26, 61 and Mk. 14, 58 suggest that it was his general attitude to the Temple practices, among other things, that cost him his life, as it cost Stephen's after him.¹⁸

It can be comfortably said that the New Testament as a whole shows a marked aversion to the idea of a priestly, ritual cult. As

Strathmann remarks, the New Testament writers much preferred 'douleia' and 'latreia' to the more suspect 'leitourgia'.¹⁹ The only two books of the New Testament to enlarge upon the Old Testament ritual cult are the Epistle to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation, and then only to get rid of the idea behind it once and for all.

The essential components of all cults, Israelite and pagan alike, had been sacrifice, temple and altar. The New Testament writers re-interpreted all three in a radical way:

1. Christ himself is the 'sacrifice'; a 'spiritual' sacrifice;²⁰
2. Christ's spiritual sacrifice is the 'offering up of his body', that is of the whole of his life in the manner of Phil. 2. At one with him in one Body, Christians are expected to do the same;²¹
3. Christ's spiritual sacrifice takes the form of 'obedience' and 'willingness to do God's will'. Christians are expected to do the same and offer the concreteness of their lives on earth: it is their 'spiritual sacrifice', their 'sacrifice of praise', their 'liturgy';²²
4. Christ's own attitude to the Temple is clear; as the shadow of reality now come into being, it has to be purified by destruction and replaced by a Temple not made by human hands and built up with real people: the holy dwelling of God in the Spirit;²³
5. Christ himself is both the prototype of this Temple and its key/foundation stone;²⁴
6. He is also the new 'spiritual' altar. Those who are with him in His Body become one living altar with him — one priest and one victim — when they too offer their 'sacrifice of praise', that is the whole of their lives.²⁵

There cannot be any doubt: the New Testament ignores and condemns any form of cultic ritualism (as opposed to 'ritual'); it sees worship as the whole of one's life, re-orientated and transformed by God's grace at different times and in many ways, including church-worship. For the New Testament, worship is a concrete 'sacrifice of praise', which, by its very nature and because of the power of God, is also true evangelism.²⁶

The New Testament concepts of 'sacrifice of praise' and of 'obedience' are not altogether what von Allmen and Peter Brunner preach; and yet they are, in parts. On the other hand, the New Testament concept of evangelism is not altogether what Luther and the eighteenth-century rationalists maintained it to be; and yet it is, in parts. P. Brunner, however, could do well to remember that the moment the question of evangelisation 'can be considered as settled' and there will be no further need to

proclaim the Gospel, the Last Day will have already come upon us, and the Church will already be out of a job, including church-worship. Von Allmen could do well to remember that obedience means more than going to church on Sundays: it means being transformed, gradually, continually, and yet more perfectly, into heralds of God's kingdom on earth and living signs of his love and forgiveness, to the end that all the world may come to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. Paradoxically, Luther himself and the eighteenth-century rationalists could have done well to remember that we are justified by faith and not by works, and that the fact that worship extends to the whole of one's life, far from being an excuse for not having to worship at all in our churches, is the very reason why we should.

Evangelism and praise, in New Testament terms, are not contradictory concepts. They are not even complementary. In a very real sense, they are identical.

Worship as Encounter With God

'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them'.²⁷

A very often misquoted passage: the Bible seems to be full of them. It has even been used as a kind of Dominical warrant for the legal quorum for a eucharistic celebration.²⁸

As it is often the case with passages from the Bible, its meaning is much deeper and much more significant than that. Paraphrased, it could run as follows: 'Where two or three are gathered together by my power — the power of God's grace, the power of the Spirit — there I am, and there is the Church, my Body'.

The verse immediately preceding says: 'If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven'.²⁹ An unconnected dictum? Certainly not. Paraphrased, it could read: 'Where two are gathered together by and in my power, and they pray, I pray with them through my on-going priesthood; that is enough for my Father to do what they, that is, what *we* ask'.

In various ways and at different times, throughout their own earthly history, God revealed to our forefathers the mystery of salvation which was hidden in God for long ages and many generations, but now is disclosed to us his People:³⁰ the mystery of salvation has a historical dimension. This historical dimension contains three distinct moments.

The first moment is one of prophecy and announcement. In it the eternal love of God is progressively disclosed, with which the Father, who wishes all men to be saved,³¹ chooses them as his own children in his dear Son.³²

The second moment is that of the 'fullness of time'. The time of preparation is over. The Word, now Incarnate, is himself the bearer of the good news of the *present* event of salvation. From 'announcement to men', the Word of salvation becomes 'reality in men' (flesh). It is the moment in which the grace given to us from eternity in Christ is actualised in the appearing of our Saviour.³³ In the Word made flesh, the reality of salvation finds both its constitutive elements:

1. perfect atonement with God; and,
2. the fullness of the divine cult.

The third moment is both the result and the perpetuation of the second moment: the 'time of Christ' continues into the 'time of the People of God'. The on-going priesthood of Christ, in which we share by grace, makes him the primary source of our worship in the Temple not made by human hands which is his Body the Church. We are only the secondary source of our worship.

Where two or three are gathered together by and in the power of the Spirit, there is the Church. There is also her Lord, the Incarnate Word. When the Body of the Lord gathers in a church to pray, through the reading and exposition of the Scriptures, through the living faith of our fellow-members of the Body of Christ, and through every word and gesture which has a right to be there — that is, through every word and gesture that bear the Word and communicate it to others — the Word which is announcement, proclamation of, and call to salvation is made present to us. As Emil Brunner puts it, when the Word of God is proclaimed, when God reveals himself in his Word, to a person who has faith, he communicates to him, not propositions, but himself as a person who speaks and discloses himself: 'an exchange takes place here that is wholly without analogy in the sphere of thinking. The sole analogy is in the encounter between human beings, the meeting of person with person,'³⁴

When we gather together to pray, God reveals himself through a system of 'signs endowed with power'. These signs not only embody the announcement: they embody also the *reality* of salvation which is the Word. They are the instruments of the transforming power of the Spirit.

The individual life of the Christian, which includes his or her Church-worship, is a tissue of '*kairoi*', a tissue of '*synthesis-moments*' and '*end-moments*' of one's individual history of salvation. Synthesis-moments, because in them are summed up both the *announcement* and the *event* (the first and the second moments of the history of salvation); end-moments, because, as the continuation — in the power of the Spirit — of Christ's saving activity on men, they are expressly directed towards the bringing

to fulfilment, in both the individual persons and the whole of mankind, the full measure of the stature of Christ: a humankind at one with God and able to give him perfect worship.

Church-worship is only a relatively minor part of the tissue of '*kairoi*' which make up our historical existence in terms of our own personal history of salvation. Whether or not we gather in a church building to pray, we *are* one Body with Christ through faith and baptism. When we *do* gather in a church building, the system of liturgical signs is the means through which both the announcement and the reality of salvation are *re-presented* to us, *re-offered* to us. It is not 'propositions' that come to us, but God himself, through the Word and in the power of the Spirit. *He* meets us; *he* calls us; *he* challenges us; *he* empowers us to respond; *he* shows us what kind of answer is required. When we *do* respond, the power of the Spirit transforms us, yet more perfectly, into the royal priesthood which is the living Temple of God in the world, the dwelling of God in the Spirit, and the living sign to others that God is a God who saves.

Religion may be born of fear, Christian worship can only be born of love. First of all, it is born out of God's love for us. Then, and only then, by God's grace, we are empowered to respond with our love and to express it in the totality of our life. Our response *is* an act of obedience on our part, but it is not an act of external compulsion on the part of God. The compulsion is the compulsion of the Gospel: it comes from within; it is something we cannot avoid doing, because, kindled by the fire of God's love, our answer can only be one of unconditional, loving surrender.

I would like to propose that worship is fundamentally transforming encounter with the power of the Word in the power of the Spirit, and that this encounter is directed towards making of us, both individually and corporately, an '*alter Christus*': a concrete 'sacrifice of praise' which is at one and the same time both 'mission' and 'evangelism'.

NOTES

1. K. Barth, *Das Geschenk der Freiheit*, Zürich, 1953, p. 22.
2. M. Luther, *Werke*, ed. Weimar, vol. 6, p. 231.
3. *Ibidem*.
4. There were, of course, exceptions, such as F. Voisin, who was promptly condemned by Pope Alexander VII. See: Brémond H., *Histoire du sentiment religieux en France*, vol. 9, Paris, 1933, p. 178.
5. Staehlin, R., *Die Geschichte des Christlichen Gottesdienstes*, in: Müller, K. F., Blankenburg, W. (ed.), *Leiturgia*, vol. 1, Kassel, 1954, p. 60.
6. Marsili, S., *Teologia Liturgica I* (Teologia generale), Rome, 1972 (pro manuscripto), pp. 90 and 92.
7. Maxwell, W. D., *An Outline of Christian Worship*, London, 1936, p. 1.

8. Torrance, J. B., 'Covenant or Contract?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 23 (1960), n. 1, pp. 51-76; and Jungmann, A. J., *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*, London, 1965.
9. See e.g. E. Schillebeeckx's treatment of the subject in *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*, London, 1971, pp. 100-109.
10. See e.g. Hugh of St Victor, *De Sacramentis*, Book 1, part 9, ch. 2.
11. Quoted by J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, London, 1965, pp. 117-118.
12. Ibidem.
13. Ibidem.
14. Ibidem.
15. Ibidem.
16. The literature on the subject is inexhaustible. See, however, Beyerlin, W., *Origins and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions*, Oxford, 1966.
17. See e.g. Daniel, S., *Recherches sur le vocabulaire du culte dans la Septante*, Paris, 1966, pp. 56-67.
18. See Acts 7: 47-53 together with Acts 8: 1.
19. Strathmann, *Theol. Wiss., z. N.T.*, 4, pp. 62-66.
20. See Eph. 5, 2; Heb. 9, 14; 10: 11-12.
21. See Heb. 10, 11; Rom. 12, 1; 1 Pet. 2, 5 (in the light of Ex. 19: 5-6). See also Mk. 12, 28 ss.
22. See Heb. 10: 7-10; 5: 7; 13: 15-16; 8: 2, 6; Phil. 2: 17 (in the light of Is. 56: 6 and Ps. 101: 6).
23. See Jn. 2: 19-22; Mt. 26: 61; Mk. 14: 58; Acts 6: 14; Jn. 4: 19-24; Mt. 21: 12-13; Mk. 11: 15-17; Lk. 19: 45-46; Jn. 2: 14-16 in the light of Mal. 3: 1-5; 4: 1-5; Is. 56: 7 and Jer. 7: 11. See also Acts 6: 14; Mk. 14: 5-8; Heb. 8: 2; 9: 11-24; I Pet. 2: 5; Eph. 2: 21-22; Col. 2: 17 and Jn. 4: 23-24.
24. See Mt. 21: 42; Mk. 12: 10; Lk. 20: 10; I Pet. 2: 4-5; Eph. 2: 4-5; Eph. 2: 21-22; I Cor. 3: 16-17; II Cor. 6: 16-19; I Cor. 3: 9. See also Mt. 21: 42 in connection with Ps. 101: 6.
25. See Heb. 13: 10; Mt. 23: 19; Jn. 17: 19; I Cor. 10: 16-27 and Rev. 6: 9; 8: 3.
26. See e.g. Mt. 5: 16.
27. Mt. 18: 20.
28. See e.g. the C. of E. *Book of Common Prayer* (1662).
29. Mt. 18: 19.
30. Heb. 1: 1 and Col. 1: 26-27.
31. I Tim. 2: 4.
32. Eph. 1: 4 and II Tim. 1: 9.
33. II Tim. 1: 10.
34. Brunner, E., *Truth as Encounter*, London, 1964, p. 114.

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