

The Doctrine and Practice of Worship in the Reformed Church

THERE is general agreement today among liturgiologists that any major changes in public worship should be made only in full consideration of the ecumenical situation within the Church of God generally. Liturgically one branch of the Church ought not now to act without looking long and hard at what the convictions and experience of other branches of the Church are leading them to do. This also means that each branch of the Church should be earnestly re-examining its own liturgical tradition and practice in the light of the whole present day situation both within and without the Church of God.

It certainly implies (as some refuse to see) no disloyalty to the Reformers now to look critically at their teaching on worship in the light of modern Biblical scholarship and in the light of the experience of the Universal Church. We have their blessing in doing this, as they realized the Church is always in need of reforming in the light of God's Word. The first point I wish to make is that our tradition does not in itself imply any blind allegiance to use and wont, any fearful clinging to doctrinal formulas anent public worship which may have been beacon lights at the Reformation but no longer express for us the whole truth, still less the truth as unchurched mankind needs to see it today.

The Reformed service was viewed as the setting forth and the reception of the Word of God. Of all the Reformers Calvin most clearly saw that the Divine Service is one—that is, as a complete unit it must be composed of Word and Sacrament in closest proximity. The Word sets forth Christ in the fulness of His grace and the Sacrament seals the Word on the hearts of believers. We know, of course, that nowhere did Reformed Worship work out as intended—that Word and Sacrament were wrenched apart, that the Eucharistic Offering and the receiving of Holy Communion became rare events (albeit from high motives). Still we must be glad that the mystery of the Lord's Supper has remained unimpaired in Reformed worship. Although the rite was reduced to one of great simplicity, the Calvinist doctrine of the sacrament has left its mark on what is generally recognized to be one of the most profoundly moving eucharistic rites in

Christendom. Of course, this worship is far too intellectual and lays far too much stress on instruction. We know that man is more than just mind and conscience and that this worship makes impossibly high demands on the average intelligence, but let us not underestimate its spirituality, where in a building stripped of all ornament and a service pruned of most ceremony man is brought face to face with God as one who has nothing to offer and only guilt to confess before One who is Holy and Exalted.

Scotland, unfortunately, never knew worship as Calvin desired it to be. From the first Word and Sacrament were not kept in close proximity week by week. Then in the 17th century disastrous Puritan influences turned our worship still further away from the Reformed ideal bringing in a superstitious fear of superstition, neglect of the public reading of Scripture, private baptism and an inordinate preference for extemporary prayer which soon degenerated into a ritualism of 'much speaking'—the pouring forth Sunday by Sunday of the same Biblical phrases, often without due regard to the mood and capacity of worshippers. Preaching too could become an ever recurring recital of the main points of the scheme of salvation as understood by the post-Calvinist theology of the Westminster Confession.

Reaction in the form of a second Reformation of worship was bound to come and it came in Scotland in the second half of last century. Many factors contributed, e.g., the Church was greatly weakened numerically by the Disruption; educated and 'refined' families were going over in large number to Scottish Episcopacy because they were attracted by a well ordered service and the mood of the times was demanding more refinement and dignity in worship. There started an avalanche of borrowing and aping. Anglicanism, Methodism and Congregationalism all contributed. Public worship lost its uniformity, in a sense something of its objectivity (although it gained here as prayers were less the devotions of an individual minister and more the prayers of the Catholic church) and to some extent guiding principles were lost sight of. Dr. Begg and others in the Free Church inveighed against these changes, pleading for what they called purity of worship, by which they meant a return to the worship of the post Westminster Assembly period, but most felt that that type of worship was defective and not normative. The mood of experiment continued and the Church refused to legislate in any detail concerning the form of public worship.

“ All ceremonies ” said Calvin, “ are corrupt and noxious which do not direct men to Christ. ” In this quotation we see also two principles which can guide us aright as we seek to adapt our worship to the needs of modern man and to scrutinize it in the light of the experience of other branches of the Christian Church. The principles are : Cast out all idols. Keep only what directs worshippers to Christ.

Indeed at the present time we need above all else to remind ourselves of the Christocentricity of worship. The Reformed Church in its understanding of the nature of public worship must cast out idols like the fear of superstition through appeal to the sensory, its distrust of ceremonial, and its wearisome determination to explain everything sacramental or mystical in terms of three or four syllable doctrinal words, and its appeal primarily to the mind and conscience of the worshippers. The Reformed Church must put at the very centre of its worship the awareness of what Christ is doing now as Mediator. He in His perfect life of obedience to God’s will has fulfilled the perfect worship and sacrifice which we can never offer. He offered to God that which we should offer and only when we are united to Him in His offering and worship by personal faith in Him can we worship by being offered up in His offering. Both Calvin and Knox were insistent that Christ is the only Priest in the Church of God. He alone represents God to men and men to God. He is the One True Worshipper, His worship is the worship which gathers and replaces the worship of Israel and it is this worship which is the substance of all Christian worship. The essence of Calvin’s interpretation of the sacraments was that Christ’s baptism is our baptism, set forth in the water of baptism, and that Christ’s sacrifice is our sacrifice set forth in the Bread and Wine, that Christ’s worship is our worship set forth in our worship. Reconciliation stands at the centre in the Reformed teaching on worship, Christ takes our sin and gives us His righteousness in order that we enter into communion with the Father. Traditionally the divine service consists of two parts, being incomplete when one or the other is missing—the liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Upper Room.

A very important recent book on Reformed worship (J.-J. von Allmen : *Worship, its Theology and Practice*) summarizes Christian worship as ‘ the reflection of the perpetual heavenly offering of which Jesus Christ is the eternal and sovereign high priest ’ (p. 25). In the words of Cullmann ‘ Jesus fulfils then a double ministry : on the one hand, that

of the expiatory act accomplished once for all ; on the other hand, the ministry of extending and exploiting the full benefits of this saving work which lasts unto eternity' (quoted in op. cit., p. 24).

von Allmen makes three points about the nature of Christian worship.

1. In her worship the Church recapitulates the history of salvation and sets forth by word and action that perfect life of worship which we see in Jesus Christ. This is done through preaching and the Sacraments, through the observance of the Christian Year, always through the power of the Holy Spirit, who takes of the things of Christ and makes this recapitulation no mere commemoration but *anamnesis* in the full sense of the word.

2. Worship is the Epiphany of the Church. Worship is not just one activity of the Church. The Church is never more truly herself than when at worship. Worship is of the essence of the Church. Worship and witness can be distinguished but must not be separated. Both are fundamental and necessary activities of the living Church. In her worship the Church reveals to the world what she is becoming by the grace of God—a redeemed society showing forth the fruits of the spirit. And since it is the highest duty and privilege of man to worship God the Church in her worship must see herself as offering the world's worship, i.e. the worship of God which man was created to offer but by reason of the Fall no longer can offer. Man ' has resigned his position as leader and priest of the world, a resignation told of in the story of the Fall, the song of the world is now perceptible only as a sigh. But in the cult because there man has found again in Christ—the *kephale* of the *cosmos*—his original function and ultimate end, the sighs and groans of creation can be transformed into singing'. (op. cit. p. 73).

3. The Church in her worship foreshadows the Judgment and Renewal of the World. In her worship the church looks towards the perfect worship of heaven, witnessing to a Kingdom which is yet to come and reminding the world of the judgment to come. Sunday and the Sacraments in particular stress this eschatological note which should be present in all worship. They point us to the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the temporal and the eternal.

Once we recognize the Christological basis of Christian worship there is room for reform and experiment. Havoc

has been and is being done by experiments which imply a Pelagian view of worship. Because the Incarnation was a rock of stumbling and offence the world must always be somewhat put out by the form of Christian worship. It is concerned with what is at once human and divine. But within this context there is an urgent obligation to seek to bring our worship up to standard for we have no right to expect people to attend services which are not what God intends them to be, especially if they are deprived or truncated in some way. Just here the reformed Churches must confess their failure in failing to provide a weekly Eucharist at which all the worshippers shall communicate. This was the practice of the Church for the first five centuries and has been desired by many in the Reformed Church for the last four centuries, but still the strictures of Karl Barth are fully justified when he says that 'worship without the Eucharist is a theological impossibility and that we have not received from God the right to make this liturgical amputation, we have usurped it. The absence of the Eucharist also compromises the other sacrament, that of baptism, and even invalidates it, since we are thus treating the baptised as though they were catechumens, because we are denying them the right to communicate. All in all, the absence of the Eucharist shows contempt for grace' (op. cit. p. 156). 'It is because God in His grace wills that the cult should be an exchange of pain for joy, of wretchedness for thankfulness, an exchange of love, that the Word does not suffice to render the cult fully Christian, that it needs also the Holy Communion'. (op. cit. p. 157). It is a grave sin through missionary work or church extension to propagate sects whose worship does not make the Eucharist central to worship.

Confession of sin has had too large a place in Reformed Church services. Public worship is meant to be celebrated not in a laundry but in a banqueting house. The Reformed service has not always stressed the positive aspects of the faith, especially the fact that on Sunday we do not merely commemorate past events but participate in the spiritual reality of Easter and Pentecost and of the life to come. Lastly we may question today whether the reformed service gives enough scope to lay participation. At great pains to throw out all priestcraft the Reformers set up a new ministerial autocracy leaving so much of the conduct of worship in the minister's hands. Many now would say that the service book should be in the people's hands; that the prayers should not be entirely in the minister's hands, that the laity

might take part in, for example, intercession ; that there should be opportunity for discussion in some forms of service. There is nothing in the Reformed tradition to exclude the laity from taking a more active part in the service provided it is always kept in mind that Christ's High Priesthood is the core of Christian worship and that all that is done must be done on that basis. Especially in urban areas it is increasingly felt that there should be some social gathering of the people for coffee or conversation immediately after the morning service that they may know and love one another as church members and be truly knit together in every way as the Body of Christ. The Church's high function to intercede effectively for mankind is at present not clearly understood when many complain that intercession is the most unreal part of prayer for them. It should be seen as the Church's opposition to all evil and injustice in the world and as a ministry to which all baptised persons are called as members of a royal priesthood in Christ.

(It was hoped to print an edited version of the discussion at the Aberdeen Conference but this was not possible on account of Dr. Robertson's illness. This curtailed version of his paper has been produced as an alternative. I. A. M.)