

Talk at University of Chicago IV Chapter / John Fawcett

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Ancient-Future Worship

Recent development among younger generation is an interest in tradition and history. Baby-boomers were all about discarding symbols and images; making church look the least like church as possible. Reached lots of people, but lost something also in terms of depth and substance.

We could all become traditionalists, and do it for the wrong reasons – formalism, legalism, aestheticism, reaction – or we could discover that the contemporary worship is not truly the most relevant, that previous generations had discovered patterns for doing things that don't need to be reinvented. Along with a postmodern ethos comes the possibility for reevaluating the tyranny of the "new". I'm convinced that the best way to revitalize our worship is to discover through it the presence of God. Worship is not about us, and it isn't primarily about our story – it's about divine action, proclaiming the greatness and salvific works of God, and then seeing that our lives fit into a bigger picture than our own individual perspective allows.

One of the dangers of contemporary worship is its focus on "me" – my experience, my problems, my felt needs, my particular social-cultural group. Granted, worship that fails to involve us and to enable us to enter in to God's presence (to connect) is a real problem as well. But hear these wise words from Robert Webber, a great thinker and teacher on worship, whom I had the privilege of having as a professor at Wheaton College. This is from his website, "Ancient-Future Worship" in a recent posting:

[Read from the post]

Why Narcissistic Worship Doesn't Wash

One of the greatest problems we face in the renewal of our worship is the misunderstanding we hold about the role of the self in worship. Too much of our worship is narcissistic; it's all about "me" and what "I do in worship."

The origin of this "me-centered worship" is complicated. But generally, it reflects the late twentieth-century's cultural emphasis on self.

I wonder if the more recent emphasis on self in worship is one more way of expressing our autonomy and self-importance.

It runs like this: "God, *I* am going to worship you. *I* consider you worthy of *my* worship. God, this is your lucky day. *I*, this self-sufficient, independent human being, around whom all of life centers, *I* am going to give you some of *my* time. *I* am going to declare you worthy of *my* worship."

So how do we go about correcting this misunderstanding? Only by understanding that worship focuses on God and God's mission to rescue the world through Jesus Christ. In words, signs, and gestures we sing, proclaim, and enact God's mission.

The heart of this story is that God assumed human nature so that we, whose humanity he shares, may be presented to the Father. By faith we are united to Jesus and baptized in his name. He is not only our Savior but also our worship.

Our worship is not an autonomous, independent act arising from self but is accomplished for us by Jesus himself. The work of Jesus is the only worship pleasing to the Father. Therefore, our worship—feeble, broken, and incomplete—is offered to God through Jesus who is the one true worship of God.

I find this biblical and ancient vision of worship to be enormously freeing.

It frees us from self-focused worship and all the legalisms associated with it. It is no longer "I am going to offer you *my* worship."

Instead, our worship is: "Thank you, Jesus, for doing for me what I can't do for myself ... I can't save myself ... I can't generate spirituality ... I can't pray as I wish ... I can't even worship you well."

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Now there's another problem that I've encountered in worship, and this one derives less from an experience-centered orientation, and more from a self-conscious intellectualizing. This may occur in reaction to the overly narcissistic problems just mentioned. Hear Robert Webber again:

[Read from second post]

Breaking Boredom With Prayer Worship

For most, "intelligible worship" and "intellectualized worship" are not the same. Worship that is intellectualized is usually dead, failing to engage the heart and mind. Its language is typically explanatory.

I've worshipped in many settings where worship is continually explained: "We just did *this*, and that leads us to our next act of worship, which will be *this*." Explained worship is driven by comprehension, management, and control. It intellectualizes the relationship with God, which normally is cultivated through worship's mystery. Consequently, its transcendence—or meaning—is undermined.

Let me create an analogy. When someone visits you, you greet that person with words of salutation and symbols, such as a handshake or a hug. You create an ambiance that expresses welcome and pleasure. You wouldn't say, "We just greeted each other with words of welcome and a sign of friendship, now we are ready to enter the living room and converse." Such an explanation would be awkward and insulting. It devalues the words and signs used to express the importance of the relationship.

This analogy transfers to worship. Worship establishes, maintains, repairs, and transforms our relationship with God. But this relationship, which is expressed in words, signs, gestures, and the like, is severely damaged through explanation. Explanation removes worship from the mysterious and numinous realm, where relationship truly lies, to the intellectual realm, where worship becomes an object to be understood and analyzed. Worship thus becomes dry, intellectual, and non-engaging.

The antidote to intellectualized worship is to understand the work of worship to be prayer.

Prayer—the meeting between God and God's people—creates the atmosphere of worship. Prayer cannot be explained. It lies in the realm of mystery and bears the quality of transcendence, only intelligible as mystery. The moment it is explained, intellectualized, and analyzed it is removed from the transcendent to the common realm. Most worship is too common, and that's why it's boring. Don't break boredom with entertainment; break boredom with worship as an engaging prayer.

<http://www.customzines.com/webber/archives/200305.html>

So, what we're going to do tonight is to enter in to an ancient form of prayer, the office of evening prayer from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. The origins of this service date back to the monastic cycles of prayer that arose in the first Christian centuries. As monasticism developed, however, it became impossible for average Christians to pray the daily offices, or cycle of services, that the monks saw as their routine, their vocation. So

prayer in the Medieval Period became somewhat professionalized. Monks prayed, and the common people were spectators at Mass, and they asked others to pray for them.

At the time of the Reformation, the Anglican (English) reformers wanted to revitalize the worship of the people, and so they pared down the eight + monastic daily prayer services to just two: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. Thomas Cranmer laid out a form that has become standard throughout the English-speaking world, and has had an enormous influence on non-Anglican worshippers as well, due to its poetic language, and its elegant sense of order. If you go to England today, you'll find that Evensong services occur almost daily in all of the great cathedrals. Unfortunately, they've become tourist events in some places, and their connection with the laity is diminished; but in places where liturgical renewal has taken place, the daily office is not dead at all, but a living tradition.

A few comments on what we're going to do:

First, think of all worship as liturgical in one sense, whether it's explicit or not. We all have a form of worship – even the Baptist church I grew up in had a pattern to its services. I'd argue that all effective worship incorporates four basic actions:

- Gathering,
- Receiving from God,
- Responding to God, and
- Going Forth.

Gathering brings us together, invokes God's presence, and sets aside the service as sacred time – the time when eternal encounter breaks into our metered, clock-centered existence. Receiving from God should then take priority as the proclamation of God's glory, praise, and work comes to us in song, Scripture, and preaching. After that, we are then free to respond to God by confessing our faith, praying, and giving thanks. At the end, we go out into the world, knowing that our lives have been reordered by our encounter with God's presence. We are prepared to serve the Kingdom of God because we've been renewed.

You'll observe that pattern loosely in what we do tonight. We'll have a confession of sin at the beginning, which in this liturgy is part of the gathering. In some services, it comes as a part of the response to the Word of God. Either one works.

We'll also be doing two canticles: the Song of Mary, and the Song of Simeon. These are part of the traditional biblical songs that are done at every Evening Prayer service. The Psalm and the Old and New Testament readings come from the lectionary for the day. They are part of a cycle of readings that cover large sequential passages of scripture over a two-year period. [the Sunday lectionary runs on a 3-year cycle] Reading the Scripture publically in this way means that we cover passages that might not be our favorites, and we allow the voice of the Lord to communicate directly to his people, and it's a special benefit when the preacher may not be that inspired!

The written prayers are not intended to preclude spontaneous prayer, and the Prayer Book encourages the congregation to offer spontaneous prayers at appropriate points. I'll lead out in that. Also, the songs may be unfamiliar to you, but don't worry too much. I'll try to lead them clearly, and several have antiphons, or chorus-responses that become easily familiar.

Finally, worship is not to be legalistic or judgmental – it's not a performance, but a gateway whereby we enter into the worship that surrounds God's throne. There is incredible diversity in the way that we do that – even within a liturgical structure. I hope that if this type of worship is unfamiliar to you, you will glimpse the possibilities for freedom that can be present even within a more ordered and structured service.