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BULLETIN

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FOUNDATIONS

Jesus' Faith and Ours: A Re-reading of Galatians 3
Richard Hays 2

**The Good, the Bad and the Troubled:
Studies in Theodicy**
Marguerite Shuster 6

MISSION

Worship: A Methodology for Evangelical Renewal
Robert E. Webber 8

Special Coverage

**The 1983 Assemblies of the World Council of Churches
and the World Evangelical Fellowship**
Introduction Mark Lau Branson 11
Notes from Vancouver 12
Evangelicals and the World Council of Churches:
A (Very!) Personal Analysis Donald W. Dayton 14
Evangelicals at Vancouver: An Open Letter 18
An Evangelical Evaluation of the WCC's Sixth
Assembly in Vancouver 19
Mission and Evangelism—An Ecumenical Affirmation 21
Highlights from Wheaton '83 22
The Church in Response to Human Need 23

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

**Theology and Experience:
A Complete Bibliography on Henri Nouwen**
Robert Durback 27

REVIEWS

Book Reviews (Itemized on back cover) 29

Worship: A Methodology for Evangelical Renewal

by Robert E. Webber

Trend watchers are telling us that the next important issue in evangelical churches is worship. Rumbblings of discontent are already being heard in the church. Some are talking about boredom with sameness, others are concerned over the lack of relevance, and many feel the need to become worshipers but cannot find the words or concepts to articulate their need, or signposts to direct this search. Unfortunately many evangelical seminaries are not prepared to offer our churches adequate leadership in worship.

I speak from experience. I graduated from three theological seminaries without taking a course in worship. Even though I was planning to become a minister, no one ever sat me down and said, "Look, worship is one of the most central aspects of your future ministry. Now is the time not only to learn all you can about the subject, but to become a worshiping person so you can offer mature leadership to your congregation." The simple fact is that my seminary professors themselves knew little about the subject. My seminary education left me with the impression that the only important matter in morning worship was the sermon. All else was preliminary. Pick out a couple of hymns. Say a few prayers. Get through the announcements. Let the choir sing. And now, here comes what we all came for—the sermon! I say heresy, bunk, shame!

In this article it is my intention to speak to evangelical seminaries and seminarians in particular because that is my tradition. And, again, I am concerned that worship has been relegated to the corner of the curriculum, and treated with indifference. It is my purpose to argue for something more than the mere inclusion of worship courses in the curriculum. What is needed within core seminary education is a recognition of worship as a necessary discipline among other disciplines. Unfortunately, in the curriculum of most evangelical seminaries worship is relegated to the practical department and treated as a matter of technique and style. But worship in fact requires interdisciplinary study demanding expertise in biblical, historical and systematic theology as well as the arts, practical expertise and personal spiritual formation. Thus worship, or more properly *liturgics*, is one of the more vigorous and demanding of the seminary disciplines. It must be taken off the back burner and given its rightful place in the seminary curriculum. What this study would do would be to give us a methodology for renewal in worship. This methodology involves first the attempt to understand our present practice as the product as a particular past. Second, it involves rediscovery of our heritage: the model of worship contained in Scripture and the resources for worship developed by the church throughout her history, particularly in the early centuries. And third, it involves using this model and these resources as we seek to make our own worship more faithful.

Understanding the Present

As children of the Reformation we often get our theological bearings by looking to the Reformers. And this is not a bad place to begin in getting our liturgical bearings. My own study in this area yields two general theses. The first is that there is a radical difference between the worship of our sixteenth century evangelical

predecessors and contemporary evangelical practice. The second is that Protestant-evangelical worship has followed the curvature of culture, rather than being faithful to the biblical, historical tradition of the church. A brief examination of these two theses is in order.

First, the gap between present evangelical worship and the practice of the Reformers can be seen easily through an examination of the Reformation liturgies. Pick up any of the liturgies such as Martin Luther's *Formula Missae* of 1523, Martin Bucer's *Strasbourg Rite* of 1539, John Calvin's *Form of Church Prayers* in 1542 or something as late as Richard Baxter's *The Reformation of the Liturgy* in 1661 and the difference can be readily seen. I find, for example, the five following characteristics in these liturgies: (1) an affinity with the liturgies of the ancient church; (2) an order that follows the pattern of Revelation and Christian experience; (3) a significant emphasis on reading and hearing the Word of God; (4) a high degree of congregational involvement; and (5) a view of the Lord's Supper that affirms its mystery and value for spiritual formation.

By contrast my experience in many evangelical churches is as follows: (1) a radical departure not only from the liturgies of the ancient church but those of the Reformation as well; (2) confusion about order; (3) minimal use of the Bible; (4) passive congregations; and (5) a low view of the Lord's Supper.

How did this change occur? What are the cultural, social, religious and theological factors that contributed to these changes? How has the actual character of worship changed over the last several centuries? What do these changes mean for the corporate life of the church today?

It is not my intention to answer all these questions. Indeed, considerable historical work must be done in the devaluation of Protestant worship between 1600-1900 before a full and adequate answer is available. However, my preliminary work in this area leads to the second thesis: evangelicals have followed the curvature of culture. A few illustrations will illuminate this point.

As the meaning of worship became lost among various groups of Protestant Christians, the shape of worship was accommodated to the overriding emphasis within culture. For example, the first significant shift occurred with the introduction of the print media through the Gutenberg Press. Protestantism, which can be characterized as a movement of the word, led the way in the shift from symbolic communication of the medieval era to the verbal communication of the modern era. Because words were regarded as higher and more significant vehicles of truth than symbols, images, poetry, gesture and the like, all forms of communication other than the verbal became suspect. Consequently, Protestant liturgies were not only word centered but attached great religious importance to the verbal content of worship.

A second shift occurred as the result of the Enlightenment. The concern for rational, observable and consistent truth which grew out of the empirical method gradually influenced worship. The essential feature of worship was the sermon. All else sank into relative unimportance. In Puritan circles sermons were sometimes three hours in length with a break in the middle. They were often exegetical and theological dissertations that would be considered beyond the grasp or care of the average lay person today.

Another shift in worship can be observed as a result of the rise

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of revivalism. The field preaching of the evangelists gradually replaced the morning service, making Sunday morning a time for evangelism. Although preaching still played a central part, one focus shifted from information directed toward the intellect to an emotional appeal aimed at the will. The climactic point became the altar call to conversion, rededication, consecration to ministry or work on the mission field.

Today another shift is taking place resulting from the current revolution in communications. The entertainment mentality which thinks in terms of performances, stages and audiences has been making its appearance in local churches. Consequently, evangelical Christianity has produced its Christian media stars. Unfortunately many churches are following the trend by "juicing" the service with a lot of hype, skits, musical performances and the like which will attract the "big audience."

My concern is that this kind of evangelical worship not only represents a radical departure from historic Protestant worship but also an accommodation to the trends of secularization. Worship, which should stand at the very center of our Christian experience, having been secularized, is unable to feed, nourish, enhance, challenge, inspire or shape.

How will change be brought about? Not simply by going back to the Reformers, but by critically appropriating their—our!—inheritance: worship defined and informed by Scripture and the early church. That is, we need to rediscover a biblical-theological model of worship, and reappropriate the means of worship of the early church.

Restoring a Biblical-Theological and Historical Perspective of Worship

As evangelicals we must acknowledge that the true character of worship is not determined by people, but by God. Much of contemporary evangelical worship in anthropocentric. The biblical-theological view of worship, however, is that worship is not primarily for people, but for God. God created all things, and particularly the human person, for his glory. Thus, to worship God is a primary function of the church, the people who have been redeemed by God.

The meaning of the Greek word *leiturgia* is work or service. Worship is the work or service of the people directed toward God. That is, we do something for God in our worship of him. We bless God, hymn him and offer him our praise and adoration. But worship is not without reason. We worship because God has done something for us. He has redeemed us, made us his people and entered into a relationship with us.

Consequently the biblical rhythm of worship is on doing and responding. God acts. We respond. What God does and is doing happened in history and is now told and acted out as though it were being done again. The unrepeatability of the event is being repeated, as it were. And we are present responding in faith through words, actions and symbols of faith.

Pick out a couple of hymns. Say a few prayers. Get through the announcements. Let the choir sing. And now, here comes what we all came for—the sermon! I say heresy, bunk, shame!

There are two parts to this biblical-theological model of worship that need to be examined. First, worship is grounded in God's action in Jesus Christ, which, although it occurred in the distant past, is now recurring through the Holy Spirit in the present.

The point is that worship is rooted in an event. The event-character of worship is true in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament the event which gives shape and meaning to the people of God is the Exodus event. It was in this historical moment that God chose to reveal himself as the redeemer, the one who brought the people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob up out of their bondage to Pharaoh with a strong arm. They then became his people, his *qāhāl*, the community of people who worship him as Yahweh. Thus

the Tabernacle and later the Temple, the feasts and festivals, the sacred year, the hymnic literature and psalms of thanksgiving revolve around the God who brought them up out of Egypt and made them his people.

The same is true in the New Testament. In the Christ-event God showed himself as the loving and compassionate one who came to free humankind from the kingdom of evil. In the birth, life, death and rising again of Christ, Satan was vanquished. Christ showed himself Victor over sin, death, and the domain of hell. The worship of the primitive Christian community was a response to this event. Hymns, doxologies, benedictions, sermons and symbols of bread and wine all flow from this event, and return to it in the form of proclamation, re-enactment, remembrance, thanksgiving and prayer.

The second part of this biblical-theological model of worship is the understanding of the church as the response to the Christ-event. The church is the corporate body of Christ, and is the context in which the Christ-event is continuously acted out.

Thus the phenomena of the Christ-event does not stand alone. There is another event which happened simultaneously with it, an event intricately connected and inextricably interwoven with the Christ-event. It is the church, the new people of God, that people through whom the Christ-event continues to be present in and to the world. The church is the response to the Christ-event. It is that people whose very essence cannot be described nor apprehended apart from the Christ-event. These are the people in whom Christ is being formed and without whom the fullness of Christ cannot be made complete. It is the *ekklesia*, the worshipping community.

This biblical-theological model of worship, the central Christ-event made present and the church responding in celebration, is basic to worship renewal. The model is radically evangelical, yet I dare say it has been lost to our churches that have turned worship into a time for teaching, evangelizing, entertaining or counseling. Methodologically worship renewal must begin with a fresh rediscovery of *Christus Victor* and the church as the community in whom the Christ-event is celebrated to the glory of God.

But beyond rediscovering this model, we need to recover that rich treasury of resources handed down to us by the experience of the church. I find American evangelicalism to be secularized in its attitude toward history. There is a disdain for the past, a sense that anything from the past is worn-out, meaningless and irrelevant. There seems to be little value ascribed to what the Holy Spirit has given the church in the past. It is all relegated to tradition and dismissed as form. At the same time no critical examination is directed toward present distortions which have been elevated without thought to a sacred position. Evangelicals who want to reform their worship must therefore abandon their disdain of the historical, and return to a critical examination of the worship of the church in every period of history.

There is a normative content to worship that is found in the worship experience of the church everywhere, always and by all. This is the content of word, table, prayer and fellowship (see Acts 2:42). Further, in the same way that the church has wrestled with its understanding of Christ and the Scripture through creeds, commentaries, systematic theologies and the like, so also the church has developed ways to do its worship. These include structural forms, written prayers, hymns, rules for preaching, the church year, the lectionary, and numerous symbolic ceremonies. Interestingly, in the early church these resources were being developed at the same time that creedal statements were coming into being. Yet, we evangelicals who affirm the Nicene and Chalcedon creeds and boast that we remain faithful to their intent are proudly neglectful of the liturgical forms and theological perception of worship shaped by some of the same church leaders.

Specifically we need to recognize that those who have gone before us, those who have wrestled with the meaning and interpretation of the faith in creeds and liturgy, were women and men of faith. To accept the creeds on the one hand and reject the liturgies by inattention that often expresses itself in disdain is contradictory and unwise. For orthodoxy was primarily given shape in the liturgy, and the creeds were originally part of the larger liturgical witness. We recognize that the early church was unusually gifted with the spiritual leadership of Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, John

Chrysostom and Augustine. Yet we neglect to study the worship of the church which reflects their faithfulness to Christ and the orthodox tradition.

Nevertheless the Scripture is still the judge of all liturgies. To be sure, there are liturgies which fail to hand down the orthodox tradition. For example, liturgies which reflect an Arian Christology or those medieval liturgies which clearly reflect a sacrificial notion of the Eucharist must be judged by the orthodox tradition. But the task of critical evaluation of the older liturgies sharpens our ability to offer constructive and critical evaluation of contemporary worship. For without a knowledge of the worship experience of the church throughout history we are left without adequate tools either for critiquing contemporary worship or reconstructing a worship that is faithful to the Christian tradition.

In terms of tradition we must be able to distinguish different levels and thus attach a corresponding scale of values to them. If we think in terms of a series of concentric circles, the Apostolic Traditions must be central. The Apostolic Tradition includes the word, table, prayers, hymns, benedictions and doxologies. A second concentric circle includes those traditions which are universally accepted and practiced by Christians. This would include creeds, confession, the kiss of peace, the Lord's prayer, the *gloria in excelsis Deo* and the church year. In a third concentric circle we may place those traditions which are peculiar to a particular grouping of people such as the Orthodox Church in the East, the Catholic Church in the West, or one of the many Protestant denominations. Matters such as vestments (or no vestments), bells, architectural style, inclusion of the little entrance or the great entrance, musical tones and issues regarding kneeling, standing or raising hands during prayer are all matters of cultural and stylistic preferences. Finally, in a fourth circle, one may place those specific customs that are peculiar to a local congregation. Certainly, when we recognize the original impulses from which these ceremonies derive, we may see them for the most part as expressions of faith, witnesses to the importance attached to Christ and his redeeming work. Our task is not to be judgmental in a manner of spiritual superiority, but to dig beneath the tradi-

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tions to recover the spirit that originally animated them. Then we, too, may share in the original dynamic that enlivened the telling and acting out of the Christ-event in another time and another place.

In sum, worship renewal needs to be rooted in a thorough-going biblical-theological understanding of Christ and the church. And second, it needs to draw on all the resources available to the church derived through the continuous struggle of the church to be faithful to the tradition. Now the question is, what kinds of changes may occur in evangelical worship as a result of this methodological approach.

Applying the Biblical-Theological and Historical Methodology

Changes do not come easily in any aspect of the church. Worship is no exception. Nevertheless I foresee the approach which I have proposed challenging evangelical worship in at least six areas.

First, it will challenge the understanding of worship. I find that evangelicals frequently exchange true worship for the substitutes mentioned in the first section. Those evangelicals who are thinking about worship tend to think almost exclusively in terms of worship as expressing God's worth. While it is essential to recover worship as directed toward God, it is equally important to rediscover the content of that worship. That content may be summarized this way: In worship we tell and act out the Christ-event. God is in this action doing the speaking and acting. Consequently we respond to God and to each other together with the whole creation to offer praise and glory to God.

Second, evangelicals will be challenged in the area of structure. evangelical services lack a coherent movement. There seems to be little, if any, interior rhythm. Historical worship, on the other hand, is characterized by a theological and psychological integrity. Theologically, worship is structured around God's revelation in word and incarnation. This accounts for the basic structure of word and table. Psychologically the structure of worship brings the worshiper through the experience of his or her relationship with God. It follows the pattern of coming before God in awe and reverence, confessing our sins, hearing and responding to the Word, receiving Christ in bread and wine, and being sent forth into the world.

Third, evangelicals will be challenged in a matter of participation. I find most evangelical worship to be passive and uninvolving. The worshiper sits, listens, and absorbs. But seldom does the worshiper respond. As in the medieval period, worship has been taken away from the people. It must be restored. Further, the participation of the people can be enhanced through the use of lay readers and preachers, congregational prayer responses, scripture responses, antiphonal readings, affirmations of faith, acclamations, the kiss of peace and increased sensitivity to gestures and movement.

Fourth, a study of the past will sensitize evangelicals to the need to restore the arts. One of the great problems within the evangelical culture is a repudiation of the arts in general, and more specifically the failure to employ the arts in worship. This disdain toward the arts is deeply rooted in a view that consigns material things to the devil. The pietistic and fundamentalistic backgrounds to modern evangelicalism are addicted to the erroneous view, dualism, that sets the material against the spiritual. Consequently, art, literature and music are frequently seen as the vehicles of evil, means through which people are lured away from spiritual realities to mundane physical attachments.

The repudiation of the material is in direct contradiction to the incarnation and to the stand taken by the church against Gnosticism. Consequently, the visible arts as well as theatre, the dance, color and tangible symbols have historically had a functional role in worship. Space, as in church architecture, is the servant of the message. The design and placement of the furniture of worship such as the pulpit, table and font bespeak redemptive mystery. The use of color, stained glass windows, icons, frescos, and carvings are means by which the truths we gather around in worship are symbolically communicated. Worship not only contains elements of drama, but is a drama in its own right. It has a script, lead players and secondary roles played by the congregation.

Fifth, evangelicals will be challenged to reconsider their view of time. We practice a secular rather than a sacred view of time. The restoration of the church year and preaching from the lectionary is a vital part of worship renewal. The church year provides an opportunity for the whole congregation to make the life of Christ a lived experience. It is not merely an external covering of time, but the very meaning of time itself. During the church year we enter fully into the anticipation of Advent, the joy of Christmas, the witnessing motif of Epiphany, preparation for death in Lent, participation in the resurrection joy of Easter and the reception of Pentecost power. Surely it is an evangelical principle to live out the life of Christ. Practicing the church year takes it out of the abstract and puts it into our day-to-day life in the world.

Sixth, a recovery of true worship will restore the relationship between worship and justice. Worship affects our lives in the world. It is not something divorced from the concerns of the world. Because Christ's work has to do with the whole of life, so also worship which celebrates that life, death and resurrection relates directly to hunger, poverty, discrimination and other forms of human suffering.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to outline a methodology for worship renewal. My concern is that evangelicals who are now beginning to rediscover the theme of worship will offer a superficial approach to worship renewal. Our unexamined assumptions about worship could dull our hearing of Scripture. And our disdain for the past could prevent us from being open to the rich treasury of the historical understanding and practice of the church. This we must work together to change.