

THE PRACTICE OF WORSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Not the least of the distinctive features of the New Testament church was the character of its worship. What little we are told about it shows that the worship of the early church was decisively different from both that of Judaism and the various cults to be found in the Gentile culture of the day. Of course this distinctiveness took a little time to establish itself. The Christians in Jerusalem continued for some time in temple worship as well as worship among themselves as Christians (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 21:26). And the synagogue can be seen to have had its influence upon the worship of the early church just as it did upon its organization.

But the worship of both the Hebrew temple and the pagan temple was characterized by prescribed forms and activities and by pre-determined content, performed by specially selected individuals. Furthermore, it took place in a special building or place set aside (consecrated) for the particular purpose. By contrast, the early church did without special places for worship; permitted or encouraged participation in worship by members; and clearly left much latitude to participants to decide the form and content of the worship event. We should not, however, assume that all worship was spontaneous in the early church—evidence of preformulated worship material can be discerned in the pages of the New Testament.¹

New Testament worship was consistent with the radical dissolution of the distinction between the sacred and the secular which was characteristic of the pentecostal age. The normal place of worship was not special but in people's houses (Acts 3:23–31; 12:12–17; 18:7; 20:7; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 11:17–32). There was great freedom of form and content as can be seen

particularly from the account of the worship at Troas (Acts 20:7–12) and at Corinth where clearly Paul is describing the normal worship of the Corinthian church (1 Cor 14). Prophetic utterance was also a regular, not to say normal, occurrence in the gatherings of the New Testament church.

If all the references are taken together we can see that in the New Testament there is no sharp distinction between meetings of the local church (congregation) as such, meetings of part of it, and meetings which, in Brethren parlance today, might be described as 'private' or unofficial. Rather, there is a flexible continuum from small and no doubt impromptu gatherings in the homes of individuals to larger gatherings, possibly in the commodious home of a well-to-do member of the congregation, possibly in a particular part of the temple precinct in Jerusalem, possibly in the fields. All were meetings of 'the church', the form and character of events to some extent depending no doubt on the circumstances and scale of the particular gathering. All, it might be added, must in principle have been equally subject to the leadership and authority of the church, in particular as to doctrine and the Pauline injunction, for example, that 'all things should be done decently and in order' (1 Cor 14:40).²

This flexible pattern of worship did not last long in the church. Just as sacerdotalism began to be discernible in certain parts of the church before the end of the first century, so formal liturgies also began to emerge quickly. These were possibly parallel and self-reinforcing phenomena since a distinct clergy is helped in establishing its special position by having a formal liturgy which only it is qualified to perform.

This formalization can be seen in other aspects of church life, such as the discontinuance of immediate baptism in favour of the rigorous preparation of candidates for baptism annually on Easter Sunday. There were good practical reasons for some of this, just as the phenomenal growth of the early church in some places made it sensible to meet not in homes but in specially reserved and, soon, specially designed buildings. Frequently, those special buildings were modelled on the lay-out of the synagogue and in time, it has to be said, they were influenced, too, by the lay-out of the pagan temples with which so many converts were familiar. This trend was reinforced, it may be surmised, by the theological move towards sacerdotalism.

The influence of familiar structures and practices on any group of Christians is inevitable. We ourselves will be affected by it. The Brethren oversight of the nineteenth century can be seen from one point of view, not so much as an effort to return to the principles of the New Testament as an application of one of the characteristic institutions of Victorian England—the committee. (So was the Parochial Church Council invented for the Anglicans by William Temple and others in 1921!) In our own day, I am struck by the similarities between the physical and phonetic

manifestations to be seen and heard on the video tapes of rock concerts which my children play, and those to be found at Christian celebrations such as those at the annual Spring Harvest event. In itself this is no bad thing. If worship is to be meaningful to the individual and the group, it must be expressed in an intellectual and emotional idiom with which they can identify. But on the question of worship, as on other matters, the church and its leadership had better be on its guard. The genius of the New Testament is that it does not seek to legitimize and sacralize any particular form or way of doing things in worship. Rather, in decisive counterpoint to both Hebrew and Gentile worship, it presents the radically new goal of a worship which, in the Holy Spirit, is vibrant, dynamic, alive and unrestricted by form, place and person.

The history of the church suggests that in periods of revival and restoration efforts are usually made to recover the New Testament character of worship. As the fires of spiritual intensity burn down, however, formalization of worship re-establishes itself. The church tends to revert to the forms of religious institutionalization which are common to fallen man. So it re-establishes a caste of 'holy' men to lead or perform worship, 'sacred' places for worship, 'sacred' formularies for worship. In short, it tends to re-establish the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular which the Christian spirit and mind of the New Testament simply refused to recognize.³

BRETHREN WORSHIP

Roots

The experience of the Brethren movement has been no exception, despite its conscientious efforts to evade this experience. Two different traditions of worship can, in my judgement, be discerned in Brethren congregations in Britain at least. Each owes its origin to different spiritual roots.

First, there is a tradition of spontaneous or 'open' worship which Brethren adherents would regard as both the characteristic form of Brethren worship and the normative form of Christian worship. Traditionally, it has been practised at the meeting known as the Lord's Supper or the Breaking of Bread, and in the weekly prayer meeting. This method derives from the efforts of the founders of the movement in the 1830s and 1840s to return to what they regarded as the authentic character of worship as depicted in the pages of the New Testament.

For particular reasons relating to the specific origins of the movement, manifestations such as prophecy and tongues-speaking were rejected as appropriate practice in this worship. But its character was essentially charismatic in that it looked directly to the Holy Spirit to lead audible

participation in worship and accordingly allowed for a wide measure of contribution from the congregation. (Though in the early days a presidency with, in essence, a police power to control unhelpful contribution was practised in some places.⁴)

A similar openness was also practised with respect to the ministry of the Word, in the midweek ministry meeting, the conversational Bible study, and the Saturday inter-congregational conferences which were regularly held and which were one of the principal mechanisms by which the movement acquired coherence as a denomination.

The second mode of worship derived from the alternative and quantitatively far more important source of the Brethren movement—the revivals of the latter part of the nineteenth century associated in particular with the names of Moody and Sankey, and perhaps later with Torrey and Alexander. Subsequently, these influences were reinforced by the Keswick experience and by participation in ventures such as the CSSM. These associations were as important as Brethren theology in determining the characteristic spirituality of the movement, and they provided both the hymnology of the movement (at events other than the Breaking of Bread meeting) and a highly structured form of worship with strong leadership from the platform. This structure with, for example, the singing of choruses 'while people are coming in' was, I suspect, very much modelled on the pattern of the revivalist meeting to which Moody and Sankey were heirs.

Undoubtedly, the pattern of 'open' worship would have been considered the superior form and it is doubtful whether many would have thought of what went on at the gospel meeting as being worship—though it clearly was and it can be argued that the undoubted success in its day of that meeting as a vehicle of evangelism owed much to the reality of worship expressed by the Christians present.

Contemporary expression

Among the Protestant sects, the Open Brethren have been remarkably successful in maintaining their vigour and spiritual vitality over a period of some five or six generations: in other groups, the rate of spiritual decline and departure from evangelical truth has often tended to be more rapid. Nevertheless, it is scarcely surprising that over such a long period many features of its denominational life should have ossified into debilitating traditions. In no aspect has this been more true than in its worship. Despite the rejection of written formularies, of special sacred buildings, and of a special sacred caste, the tendency has been to institutionalize to such a degree that sacred and secular compartments in the lives of the worshippers have been re-established.

Nowhere has this rigidity been seen more clearly than in the Breaking of Bread service. That event is widely regarded (with some biblical justification of course) as being central in the life of the congregation. In consequence, nothing should, it is often argued, dethrone it from its place in the weekly calendar—certainly not the task of evangelism, for example. It becomes the central cultic act. Attendance at it becomes as mandatory as that of the Catholic at weekly Mass. It may even be regarded as virtually the exclusive measure of an individual's spiritual state (some take this view to the point that while they have no effective fellowship with the congregation concerned and indeed may be at loggerheads with it doctrinally and personally, they would never dream of missing the Breaking of Bread meeting).

In form, the meeting (and indeed the prayer meeting) has generally come to be dominated by a rigid though unwritten liturgy. Though there are variations between congregations, in any one of them the order of the event is utterly predictable. It will almost certainly begin with a hymn. That hymn will determine the theme and content of the remaining period of worship. There will be a prayer of institution before the bread is taken, and a similar prayer before the wine is taken. The offering will be taken up immediately following; and if there is arranged or 'spontaneous' ministry it will then follow. The prayer of institution for the bread will begin at an accustomed time, give or take a minute or two. The whole event will conclude at a particular time (justified of course on the grounds of convenience and practicality). If anyone moves outside this timetable the body language of emotional and intellectual discomfort will be all too obvious in the congregation—for example, if a hymn or song is proposed after the elements have been passed round, or possibly while they are being passed round!

The form and content of worship is also restricted. The limitation on content can be traced to the view that the meeting is in *memory* of the Lord's *death* so that any worship material which does not meet this single criterion is considered to be inappropriate. In consequence, a homiletic contribution on an individual's spiritual experience of the Lord is ruled out. So is a word of personal testimony from a young person as to what the Lord has done for them recently. So, too, is thanksgiving for any matter which is not directly related to the work of Christ on the cross. The same principle can be seen at work in relation to the use of scripture and song in open worship at the Lord's Table. The material *must* focus narrowly on the Lord's death. Readings, hymns, ministry which turn the congregation's mind towards the Father, or towards the glory of God, or towards his kingdom which is at once now and not yet, is unacceptable. If anyone dares to introduce this type of material, others will quickly bring the meeting back to content which is considered appropriate to the occasion.

If acceptable content is narrow, so is form. Expository preaching of the Word in the course of worship is often considered unsuitable, and one suspects that in some places homiletic preaching or indeed any human enlargement upon the meaning of scripture is frowned upon. In many places, the form has settled down into a sandwich of hymn, prayer and scripture reading, punctuated by long (often empty) silences, and it would be thought odd even to propose that one hymn should be followed immediately by another. Often oral participation is limited for want of (male) numbers to a handful of individuals who are themselves only too conscious that there are limitations on the spiritual variety which they are capable of bringing to the worship event.

The problems of limitation of form are not in my view limited to highly traditional approaches to worship. Efforts 25 and 30 years ago to modernize worship have brought their own problems. Though highly necessary at the time, the instruments then introduced to accompany worship at the Lord's table (the piano and the organ)—in most places they had of course been used at evangelistic meetings since the last century—have proved to be highly inflexible. So have the collections of hymns then favoured, largely on grounds of their theological and intellectual depth. Valuable though these developments were in their time, they have resulted in an inflexibility in worship and severe interruptions often in the spiritual 'flow' of worship. Congregations are tied intellectually, manually and visually to their hymnbooks and can apparently do nothing in worship without waiting for the accompanist to find the tune and strike it up on the instrument.

The same kind of problems can afflict meetings for prayer. Here, too, the range of content is narrow. The event is often seen as being narrowly intended for *intercessory* prayer, and material which concentrates on worship is considered misplaced from the worship services of the congregation. Where this is combined with an unwillingness to engage in deep supplication for the specific needs of individual members of the fellowship and for the fellowship as a whole, the result is arid meetings in which a dull and unspecific shopping list of requirements is presented to the Lord. Again there are extensive empty silences punctuated by a few lengthy contributions by the 'professional' pray-ers of the congregation. There is little worship and thanksgiving, and little sense of the corporate nature of prayer in which the baton of prayer is eagerly and urgently taken up from one to another.

Things are frequently little or no better at gospel or teaching meetings which are prepared and led, usually by the person appointed to preach at the occasion. Preparatory hymn and song singing has rightly been abandoned as no longer serving a useful purpose. This is usually because it no longer catches the idiom in which people wish to worship. It is

interesting that in some circles where there is manifestly a spirit of worship preparatory singing of spiritual songs is widely to be found. Once the 'service proper' has begun (significant terminology in itself), an unwritten nonconformist liturgy is generally followed. It comprises hymns interspersed with prayers and Bible readings, leading in due course to the preaching of the Word—the familiar 'hymn-prayer sandwich'. Apart from the notices, individual contribution in prayer and reading is confined to the speaker, and congregational expression is confined to collective hymn singing. Frequently it is all too obvious that what precedes the address is viewed as no more than preparatory to it. These preliminaries are not thought of as capable of standing on their own as a sufficient end in themselves—if they were the only purpose of coming together, we would not bother.

Finally, singing is confined to collections of *hymns* such as *Hymns of Faith, Christian Worship, Christian Praise*, or even, still, *The Golden Hymnal, Sacred Songs and Solos, or Redemption Hymns*. Accompaniment is by means of a single 'heavy' instrument. All these were of course dynamic innovations in their day and there is no doubt that the church can make much good use of the forms of expression in which earlier generations of Christians chose to cast their spiritual experience. But if this material becomes the sole means of *our* spiritual expression, then we shall be being truly liturgical, ie, casting our worship in traditional formularies, albeit in the undoubtedly worthy ones of the first to fourth evangelical revivals. I would assert that there is something seriously wrong if a group of Christians do not cast at least some of their corporate expressions of fellowship in forms which are original to themselves. Otherwise, they are likely to be living on past spiritual capital.

Summary

In summarizing the character of the corporate spiritual exercises commonly found in Brethren congregations in Britain, I would point to three key features. First, they have an essentially cerebral nature. It is as though we have taken too seriously to heart John Henry Newman's criticism of the Evangelicalism in which both Brethrenism and Tractarianism were rooted, viz that it was guilty of shallow emotionalism.⁵ It is doubtful, in fact, if the Brethren of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century could have been charged with being over cerebral, but by way of reaction in the last two generations there seems to have been a fear of engaging the emotions in worship, and certainly of permitting any significant *physical* expression of worship. These would be rejected as associated with the (unbiblical) over exuberance of ethnic and Pentecostal groups.

Second, even when spiritual exercises are cast in a form in which worship is intended to be spontaneous under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, there is often—even normally—a fundamental lack of spontaneity. Rather, there is a predictability about the event which is discouraging. It will be known who will take part, roughly when, and the content will be all too familiar. There is a reluctance to break out of the accustomed form. Worship has in fact become fundamentally liturgical in character.

Third, worship in many Brethren churches has a distinctive mood which is partly attributable to the content which is thought to be appropriate in worship. There is a lack of joy and vibrancy. Frequently, the dominant sentiment is of melancholia which, in my judgement, the tradition imbibed from one strand of Victorian romanticism rather than from scripture. This melancholia encourages and feeds on a sense of spiritual depression and hopelessness which are symptomatic of the parlous state into which the movement has fallen in the last two generations. This is well illustrated by the comment of a visitor from another spiritual tradition who arrived in good time for a Breaking of Bread service. After a few moments, he jokingly remarked to his hostess, 'It feels as though we are waiting for a funeral'. After 10 minutes of worship, he was compelled to comment, now with deadly earnestness, 'We *are* at a funeral!'. Even if the story is apocryphal, it catches well the tenor of worship in many assemblies.

REFORMS

If this is an accurate analysis of the condition into which corporate worship has widely fallen, what is to be done to remedy the situation and to encourage a revival of deep spiritual experience when the church meets together?

Traditional solution

This is no new question of course. Many who are deeply committed to current traditions in Brethren worship are conscious that things are not quite as they ought to be. Others have been positively discontented with them for years. Wherever the barrenness of the worship service is mentioned, the answer which tends immediately to be given in the tradition is that all could be restored if only people, especially younger people (for they are often vociferous critics of the current state of affairs), would deepen their personal knowledge of scripture and of the Lord in their own devotional lives, and in particular if they would prepare

carefully beforehand rather than spending their Saturday evenings in socializing.

There is a degree of truth in this solution. If there is a wide gap between what is professed in corporate worship and the poverty of spiritual experience and practice in the lives of the worshippers, it is only to be expected that corporate worship will be hollow and unrewarding. One thing of which we can be certain from the gospels is that the Lord abominates spiritual and moral hypocrisy. From one point of view, corporate worship is no more than the expression of the reality of the day to day life of God's people in fellowship together. The essential identity of worship and service in the new Testament, as already noted, should never be forgotten.

But it is precisely because of this fact that the traditional solution is at best inadequate. We are not at liberty simply to throw up our hands and say that there is nothing to be done until individual Christians come to a deeper and more committed spiritual life. To do so is to propose an individualism which is common in Christianity in the West following the Enlightenment but which is questionable in biblical terms. Throughout, scripture places great emphasis on the corporate identity of the people of God and their corporate experience of him. The metaphors are collective—people, nation, body, temple, assembly—and the New Testament lays great stress on fellowship and the common life of the people together. Apart from baptism, the only rite enjoined upon the church was a fellowship meal which emphasized their union *together* with the Lord (1 Cor 10:16–17). Worship was not to be a private matter when they came together. They were to address *one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19). And one of the purposes of worship was mutual encouragement (Heb 10:25; see also 1 Cor 14:3, which is referring to one of the characteristic activities of the Corinthians' worship event). It is impossible to escape the conclusion that, typically, what the people of God experience when they come together for worship is something greater than they could experience privately. In fellowship, the whole is greater than the sum of the individual parts. It is arguable that, far from worship being no stronger than the individual experiences of God represented at the gathering, the Lord reveals himself in a special way when his people meet together. Thus it is private worship which is as likely, perhaps more likely, to be enriched by the corporate worship experience than the other way round.

Second, however, the traditional solution too conveniently shifts the responsibility away from the congregational leaders and other spiritually mature members towards the young and immature. This is curious because scripture clearly places responsibility for the maturity of the church, which ought presumably to be reflected above all in its worship

experience, with those who have been specifically gifted for that purpose, viz apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11-16). Ultimately, responsibility for worship, as for every aspect of the life of a local congregation, lies with its leaders. It is they who should be seeking the Lord's guidance about the most profitable arrangements for worship. They should be teaching and encouraging others; identifying and encouraging the exercise of gift which will enrich the corporate worship of the congregation; giving a lead and modelling for all to see the kind of worship which is mutually helpful; shepherding compassionately those who find changes in the character of worship hardest to bear.

The remainder of this essay concentrates, therefore, on the practical steps which leaders ought to take to encourage a renewal of congregational worship.

The context of worship

Despite the fact, just noted, that the worship experience of a congregation will inevitably inform and set the tone of much else in the common life of a fellowship and its individual members, it is important to remember, too, the reciprocal relationship between the various components of congregational life. Worship can at once be the leading edge and the summation of collective experience. Thus in seeking a more rewarding experience, congregational leaders may have to focus on more aspects of church life than the arrangements for worship itself. The problem may be a lack of shared congregational life, so that the members simply come together as a collection of individuals with little knowledge of and sympathy for each other and their concerns; there may even be a fundamental lack of love for each other. In that case, the priority may not be the worship meeting itself, but measures to deepen the common life of the congregation, such as meetings in informal groups for fellowship and prayer. Or the fundamental problem may be theological. The congregation simply may not understand the true nature of Christian worship, or may misunderstand the relationship between worship and the other aspects of congregational life. In that case, the priority may be teaching to rectify these misunderstandings. Or there may be deep problems in the personal lives of many members which stand in the way of deeper experience of the Lord. In that case, the priority may be pastoral care. Achievements in evangelism may result automatically in praise: if the angels worship over sinners who repent, what of the church? Ideally, then, action by leaders to encourage more inspired worship in a congregation should form part of the leaders' general strategy for the strengthening of their congregations.

Praying and modelling

If there is truth in the traditional route to deeper worship, it is as it is applied to leaders and the mature Christians in a fellowship. It is they who need to ensure that they are personally prepared for worship week by week. This is not simply a question of confession and personal experience of forgiveness, though it should certainly include that. It should include, too, the often neglected ministry of strong prayer that the Lord will reveal himself to the congregation as they worship together. Leaders need to strive in prayer for the protection and blessing of the congregations for which they are responsible. It should include, as well, waiting upon the Lord for the material, from scripture and in other ways, which can give the necessary lead to the congregation in worship. It is an aspect of the false dichotomy which is often drawn between worship and the rest of life to hold that worship is only truly Spirit-led if the words come spontaneously within the particular worship event itself. Frequently, of course, the Holy Spirit does greatly enrich worship by this means—it will be argued later that the Spirit should never be prevented from doing this. But, equally, to suggest that the Spirit cannot or does not lead in prior preparation is to place limitations on the Spirit which scripture implies he would decisively reject.

Not only should leaders themselves prepare, but they should teach and instruct all who have a part in leadership to prepare thoroughly themselves. This extends to worship leaders. It includes musicians who have the dual task of technical and spiritual preparation. The latter should not be neglected for the benefit of the former. In worship, it is at least as important that the participants' spiritual credentials should be seen as their intellectual and technical ones. For the same reason, the corporate preparation of those who lead in worship is important. Their spiritual unity and teamwork needs to be evident as well as their technical teamwork.

Encouragement in worship should include the setting of good examples. If people are not to learn by painful experience, they must learn by observing others, and that is especially true in worship. Many people will never transcend the good or bad habits which they learn from their spiritual mentors. It is important, therefore, that those in leadership should seek to model the developments in worship which they believe the Lord wishes to see. If we exhibit narrow content, long empty silences, and a heavy religiosity which is not consistent with our manner in ordinary congregational life, it will not be surprising if those whom we disciple come to think that that is what worship ought to be like.

They will do so, of course, only so long as they remain largely within our orbit. Increasingly, however, there is a mobility between areas and

congregations. People see other, more vibrant, dynamic and evidently spiritual modes of worship and, not surprisingly, they register their discontent with what they experience at home. That points to the importance of leaders' being willing to learn from others. As opportunity arises in the course of travel, they should observe what is done in other congregations in order to plunder shamelessly practices and approaches which might be profitable at home. They might even go as far as deliberately to seek out places where it is known that there is truly spiritual and spontaneous worship in order to take advantage of those models.

Structuring worship

Paradoxical as it may seem, the quickest route to the restoration of spontaneity in worship may be to introduce some degree of structure with the aim of helping people towards a deeper worship experience. In principle, the traditional Brethren approach of 'open' worship confers the widest possible measure of freedom for participation, subject only to the possibility of intervention by the elders if contributions of a certain type or a particular individual are persistently unacceptable because of their character or theology or the known unholy life of the participant.

This can present two problems. First, where worship has degenerated into a narrow and unacknowledged liturgy which is severely at odds with the principle, many present may simply feel that there is no point in trying to participate since their contribution would either be falsely constrained or unacceptable. Second, the very freedom inherent in the principle may be intimidating. For there are at least two ways of teaching people to swim. They may be invited simply to plunge in at the deep end and get on with it; or they may begin at the shallow end, with support from the teacher and other aids, and with *terra firma* close at hand. The first method is the more difficult! Yet in worship we often persist in asking people to launch out, with the thought in the back of their minds that the teacher will *not* plunge in and help if they get into difficulties, but criticize them from the side for their poor technique or simple incompetence.

It may be, therefore, that where open worship has become arid, an essential stepping stone for renewal may be for the leaders to introduce some degree of structure. For example, a specific president might be appointed whose task is to ensure that the period of worship is launched in a particular and helpful direction and who, prominently or discreetly, will seek under the leading of the Holy Spirit to steer the course of the whole event in a way which is spiritually rewarding. Such an individual might be an elder, or a teacher, or might be an instrumentalist or singer who has the necessary spiritual sensitivity and gifts.

Such leadership and structure can vary widely in character and degree.

One of the chief functions of the leader will be to expand the horizons of the congregation in worship, in effect both to model and teach worship. The aim should normally be to encourage the congregation's worship to the point at which individuals can be invited to take part spontaneously in a helpful way. But, in the final analysis, the only criterion is whether the Lord is truly worshipped corporately. A completely unstructured event is of no value if the product is not true and spiritual worship, while a fully structured event will be biblical if the result is such worship (John 4:23–24).

Breaking moulds

In seeking renewal in worship, leaders may need considerable courage in addressing the existing structures of worship. The traditional way of doing things at the Lord's Table, as described earlier, may exercise a particularly powerful influence on the character of worship, both in style and content. Experience suggests that it can be very difficult to change the character of this event by a process of gradualism. It may be necessary in effect to bypass that meeting altogether, by creating a quite separate event in a congregation's programme which the leadership uses to encourage a quite different sort of worship. Alternatively, the mould may be broken by introducing a decisively different structure to the communion service. Either approach will require due Christian concern for those who are deeply attached out of principle or habit to the customary way of doing things. And, as with all changes which affect a voluntary group, much effort needs to be invested in preparing the group for the change and in gaining their assent.

Another tradition which leaders may need to seek to change is the endemic individualism of much that passes for Christian worship. Many come to worship with the notion that, since rightly the purpose is the worship of God alone, the only thing that matters is what passes between themselves and God. This breeds a habit of mind in which the other people who have come together for the same purpose are mutually ignored. This attitude ignores the Lord's injunction that the true worshipper must first be reconciled with his brother and sister (Matt 5:23–24). It ignores the New Testament emphasis on partnership in every aspect of the corporate life of the congregation and the fact that communion is intended to be not only with the Lord but with the other members of the Christian body (1 Cor 10:14–22). Many coming to Christian worship, however, turn their backs mentally and emotionally on their fellow-worshippers to such an extent that they might as well be worshipping alone.

Where this is so, if a truly corporate worship is to be revived, leaders

may need to seek to change attitudes by teaching, by example, by structures, and by sensitive leading of worship, with the aim of obliging the congregation to recognize one another's presence. Appropriate ways include greeting one another, addressing one another at suitable moments, and acknowledging one another in passing the elements in communion. Such are the emotional hang-ups about intimacy, especially among the (?southern) English, that these steps may need to be taken with as great a sensitivity to the feelings of the group as those which affect the form and structure of the Breaking of Bread service.

Finding the right idiom

More widely, congregational leaders should seek an idiom of worship (music, poetry, words, style, etc) with which the particular congregation can identify and make a satisfactory vehicle for their own worship of the Lord. Down the years, this has been both the source of hope and the cause of much frustration in Christian worship. One of the aspects of spiritual revival has always been that it tends to express itself in the musical and poetic idiom of the time. Luther purloined the popular tunes of his day. So did General William Booth, along with the uniform and military style of the jingoism of late Victorian England. Sankey adopted the popular musical expression of the 1860s, as can be seen by comparing his sacred songs with some of the marching tunes of the American Civil War. Now that those particular idioms have had their day, there is every reason for seeking to repeat the process in our times, provided that we are satisfied that there is no reason for rejecting a particular musical or poetic form as being unsuitable *in its very nature*.

This is to propose, however, a further assault upon tradition, in one of the most sacred areas of all. For among the matters most likely to excite any traditionalist group of Christians are two things: the hymnal from which they sing; and the time of the services!

Deepening content

Much of what passes for Christian worship is unsatisfactory because it is spiritually superficial or focuses other than upon the God who is to be worshipped. One remedy is to broaden and deepen the congregation's understanding of the material which is appropriate in worship. It is at this point that the traditional link between worship and the Lord's Supper as practised in Brethren assemblies can be least helpful. A key feature of worship is an appreciation of who God is in all his limitless facets (see Rom 11:33-36). Worship is in essence a *response* to God himself. It is often poverty stricken because of a lack of appreciation and experience of God

on the part of the congregation. In this respect, the narrowness already noted in the content is no help at all. If people are to worship corporately, it is essential that they should focus their mind from the beginning on the person of God and the magnitude of his works—of creation and of redemption.

It should not be assumed that the worshippers will necessarily arrive with appropriate material in their minds for this purpose. If they do not, then it is essential that the congregational leadership should ensure that the gap is repaired, by directing minds towards the Lord. This implies focusing upon the divine revelation of himself. The most obvious way to do this is through the reading and exposition of the Word. That is why it has been so unfortunate that Brethren tradition has tended to limit severely the forms of biblical contribution which have been considered appropriate in worship.

This biblical input can be provided in a variety of ways, of course. It may be that, contrary to the traditional form, worship should begin with pre-arranged expositional or devotional ministry rooted in scripture. So far as I am aware, there is no particular biblical warrant for the widespread practice of reserving the sermon to the end of any meeting. Indeed, some of the historic Christian liturgies place the Word early rather than later in the order of service. Or it may be that the leaders should simply adopt a policy of seeing that they themselves participate early in the worship period by reading and commenting on scripture so as to inject material with which the congregation can begin to work and use as a launching pad for its worship. This will frequently be preferable to the time-honoured practice of taking up some phrase in the first hymn as the theme of worship.

Freeing for worship

But better leadership, more and better structures, and deeper theology will not, in my judgement, in themselves automatically produce a living congregational worship. If the spiritual input is confined to that of the worship leader, the congregation's experience of the Lord will get no further than his. It will be at the mercy of his state of mind, emotion and spirit at the particular time. Nor does it lie simply in better structures or in a formal liturgy which is of its very nature constricting (which is not to say that God cannot and does not use liturgical forms to great spiritual blessing sometimes). Nor does it lie in aesthetics, whether of language or music; nor in quality of performance in the worship service whether by the worship leader or the preacher or musicians. Quality in these areas can be secured by human effort unaided by the Spirit. Nor even does it lie simply in deeper preaching of the Word, though insofar as the Lord is revealed in

his written Word there should certainly be that response in the heart and life of the believer which constitutes worship.

Just as the whole purpose of teaching someone to swim or to ride a bicycle is to be able to stand back and watch them doing it for themselves, so the congregational leader's object must be to set the whole body free to worship as the Spirit leads them. One of the glories of the New Testament is that it reveals a priesthood for all believers, and the great object is that everyone at corporate worship should experience freedom to worship, audibly and inaudibly, the living God.

There are a number of areas in which freedom of form needs to be encouraged positively. Idiom has already been mentioned. Subject only to basic doctrinal checks, worshippers should be free to worship in the intellectual and emotional idiom in which they can best give expression to their thoughts and sentiments about the Lord. There should be a wide freedom as to content. Many subjects can be wholly conducive to worship, particularly where the focus is on the person, character and work of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit—not just of Jesus as saviour).

In this context, it should be noted that too severe a requirement that the theme of a particular worship period should be respected can be very restrictive for many in a congregation. Such an approach can in effect limit audible contribution to those with the intellectual ability and knowledge, not to say ingenuity, to develop the particular theme. Others who might contribute very effectively to public worship may be intimidated into silence because they feel that they cannot develop the particular theme in an acceptable manner.

A wide variety of types of contribution should be perfectly acceptable. There is no reason, for example, why personal testimony of some recent experience of the Lord, or of what he has done for the individual concerned, should be regarded inappropriate or embarrassing in worship. It should be made abundantly clear that short interventions are perfectly acceptable. Indeed, brief participation by a wide variety of people is perhaps the measure most likely to bring about more vibrant worship.

Freedom from unnecessary constraints of time may also be an important factor. It is interesting how bound congregations can become by the accustomed limits of their meetings. When the usual hour to finish has been reached, impatience to be away promptly begins to manifest itself. There may, on occasion, be legitimate practical reasons, of course. But often, when worship is burdensome, it is a symptom either of spiritual sluggishness or perhaps of the failure of the leadership to make arrangements which set the congregation free to worship. By contrast, where there is spiritual revival, people show themselves to be quite unconcerned by the passage of time and are prepared to spend literally

hours in prayer and praise—the events at Troas as recorded in Acts 20 were just the first recorded example of this phenomenon.

Sometimes a sufficient space of time is needed for a congregation to give proper expression to its corporate thoughts about the Lord, and the customary hour, up to half of which is taken up with preaching of some kind, is often simply not long enough. Some care and sensitivity to the feelings of the majority of the congregation are needed in making changes in this respect. The best course may be a gradual lengthening of the time allotted to worship, coupled with a policy of making it clear that at a certain point people are free to leave, but others may wish to continue in worship.

The structural integrity of spontaneous worship

Where worship is led by an individual or a group, and has been carefully prepared in advance, it is possible, whether by carnal or spiritual means, to achieve a satisfying coherence, balance and flow to different contributions. Once, however, the leader releases a meeting into free or spontaneous worship, these features may easily be lost. Worshippers need to be educated to the fact that they are not worshipping as individuals who are free to contribute just as they like. They need to be very conscious of one another and responsive to what the Holy Spirit is saying and doing through others who are contributing. Congregational leaders, whether or not they are in the presidential position for the particular occasion, need to be alert to this process and ready to contribute constructively themselves where it threatens to break down. They also need to stand ready to stimulate further thought or to move the event on to a further stage in the cycle of worship, when that seems to be spiritually appropriate. If effective spontaneity is to be encouraged, the requirement is for worship leaders who are sympathetic to the leading of the Spirit in the gathering and who can help the gathering to respond.

On the more practical side, congregations need to be educated in practices which are helpful to the flow of worship and those that are not. One feature which seems to me most unhelpful is unnecessary dependence upon the hymn or songbook—a consequence, perhaps, of widespread literacy. It seems that congregations often cannot contemplate singing except from them. They bury their heads in them, even for pieces with which they have been totally familiar for at least 40 years, and the habit has developed of always waiting for the tune to be announced at length on the accompanying instrument. This can introduce quite unnecessary hiatus into worship and reinforces the sense of individual isolation rather than the corporate nature of worship. There are, of course, practical

difficulties where numbers are small and musical expertise limited. But it would often be preferable for the coherence of worship if, under the leadership of the Spirit, an individual could take up a well-known song or hymn unannounced and the congregation could join in, if necessary unaccompanied. Then either the accompanist could transpose into the appropriate key, or at a suitable opportunity, shift the key appropriately. Even where songbooks are available, it often helps to display the pieces on an overhead projector in order to lift the heads of the congregation and to enable them to be more conscious of the corporate nature of worship. (This implies, of course, that questions of copyright must be properly attended to, and that arrangements be made for operating the projector and looking after the slides.)

Those presiding at worship should not neglect silence in worship, either. It is not the case that all silences are empty. It may be very helpful from time to time positively to encourage everyone present to worship the Lord silently for a period—though it is wise to make sure that they have the material ready to mind with which to do this.

Identifying and encouraging spiritual gifts

The whole point of open or spontaneous worship is to give opportunity for the exercise of the diverse spiritual gifts which are available in the particular gathering. It follows, therefore, that leaders should be seeking to identify those who have such gifts and encouraging them to develop and exercise them for the benefit of the body as a whole. By contrast, it will not help much if participation is dominated by those who are not suitably gifted.

There are some spiritual gifts which are obviously of particular relevance to worship. If it is held that the full range of spiritual gifts are still available to the church and there is no restriction on their use, then Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 14 to six which are clearly relevant: prophecy; knowledge; revelation; teaching; tongues (ecstatic utterance); and interpretation of tongues. He also refers to contributing a hymn, possibly spontaneously composed under spiritual inspiration (v 26). The reference to knowledge suggests that utterance of wisdom and utterance of knowledge, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8, are also relevant.

Prophecy and revelation are clearly of especial importance, if only because Paul says so explicitly, 'If all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all . . . the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you' (1 Cor 15:24–25). What is true for the unbeliever seems to be likely to be even more true for the believer. For the English, the almost automatic principal connotation of prophecy is with foretelling

future events. Some prophecy in the New Testament undoubtedly had that character, as when Agabus foretold extensive famine (Acts 11:27–28) and the imprisonment of Paul (Acts 21:10–11), the latter apparently in confirmation of numerous such prophecies elsewhere ('the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me'—Acts 20:23; see also Rev 22:6). But in the New Testament, the main burden of the concept of prophecy lies elsewhere: in giving direct instructions to a congregation (Acts 13:1–2), in exhorting and strengthening it (Acts 15:32), and in building it up and consoling it (1 Cor 14:3). In referring to 'some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching' (1 Cor 14:6), Paul may have in mind a spectrum stretching from a reminder of established and general Christian truth on the one hand to a more directly intended word from God to the particular congregation on the other.

Many, of course, balk at the idea that God still speaks directly today in congregational worship, but it is not clear why the idea should present such difficulty. It may be argued that the whole point of worship is to enter the presence of God and to experience him. If pre-Christian people heard him, *a fortiori* why should not those who live in the Christian era (see, for example, Isa 6 where God speaks directly; Luke 1:8–20 where he speaks through the angel; and 2 Chron 5–7 where he speaks both directly and through Solomon and the people in prophetic mode)? Evangelical Christians have long held that God speaks directly to individual Christians, in conversion and subsequently in order to guide them. It is not clear why he should be prohibited from doing this to the congregation as a whole as it meets together. They have long held, too, that he speaks directly through the exposition of scripture and the preaching of the gospel. But it is not obvious why he should now have confined himself to those methods of communication to a congregation. Such communication should, of course, be consistent with God's authoritative revelation of himself in the scriptures—which is presumably the main reason why the prophets were required to test the utterances of their brethren (1 Cor 14:29, 32; 1 Thess 5:20–21; and 1 John 4:1). But there is an obvious distinction to be drawn between revelation which purports to add to God's general enduring revelation of himself to the church as encapsulated in the scriptures, and revelation which deals with the specifics of the life and ministry of an individual or of a congregation, and which for that reason is limited in time and place.

The conclusion is that, without exercise of the intelligible gifts which Paul enumerates in 1 Corinthians 14, worship is likely to be comparatively impoverished. Their exercise is clearly related to the importance of deepening the spiritual content of worship from the Word, as already mentioned. This is a vital area in which congregational leaders need to encourage the exercise of gift if worship is to be enriched and freed into

effective spontaneity. Regrettably, it is an area in which the elders of Brethren assemblies are, by virtue of inexperience, often poorly equipped to give a positive lead.

Identifying and encouraging natural gifts

It is not disembodied spirits who come to worship God, but whole human beings. The dominical injunction is, 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mark 12:30—the last term generally refers to physical strength). In the Judaeo-Christian understanding it is difficult to draw meaningful distinctions between body, mind and spirit. Where there is true worship, therefore, it is only to be expected that it will find legitimate expression in the mind, the emotions and even physically. So there is much that can be done to enrich worship by encouraging the use of the natural gifts with which the group is endowed—instrumental, vocal, poetic.

It can be done in a way which also encourages freedom and spontaneity in worship. There is no law, for example, which says that the instrumental accompaniment of Christian worship should be limited to one instrument, any more than there was once a law in Brethren assemblies which limited it to none. There are many congregations elsewhere in the world where all instrumentalists are encouraged to bring their instrumental gift to worship as naturally as traditionally the gift of teaching has been brought to worship in Brethren churches. Provided that the overall result is orderly and edifying there is no need to be too concerned about musical balance. Congregational singing will in any case to a large extent mask that and many churches are discovering that accompaniment by a small musical group is more helpful in worship than that of a single rather inflexible instrument. Some instruments do seem more flexible than others in accompaniment of spontaneous worship. And instrumentalists who can accurately recall and pitch tunes by ear are particularly valuable in assisting congregations to worship without unnecessary interruption. They should be strongly encouraged to help in freeing worship.

Vocalists also need to be encouraged to use their skills both collectively in giving a strong lead to congregational singing and in making spontaneous individual contributions in song. Here, congregations and especially worship leaders need to be alert to whether or not the vocalist should be left to contribute individually, and to when the congregation should be encouraged to join in. The possibility of instrumental solos should not be neglected either, for example, during periods of silent worship or when the elements are passing from one to another.

One aspect of gift which generally tends to be neglected is that of the lyric writer and poet. Where the Holy Spirit is really at work in a

congregation, it is to be expected that people will not confine themselves exclusively to the vehicles of worship which have been provided by former generations or from people outside the congregation. Where there is genuine spiritual experience combined with lyrical gift, it should be natural for the individuals concerned to give expression to their praises in original work. The rest of the congregation should in turn be pleased to take up such work themselves as expressions which stem from their common experience. That it seems so rare may be because of want of deep contemporary spiritual experience. But it may also be because the individuals concerned have not been trained to see it as a possible way of expressing their praises and rendering useful service to the Body of Christ. Congregational leaders may also have failed themselves to see the possibilities in this area and to encourage the exercise of the relevant gifts. In either case, it would follow that the congregation is the poorer because gift is not being exercised 'for the common good' (1 Cor 12:7). For myself, I do not see why in addition to instrumental, vocal and lyrical gifts, the rhythmic gifts of dance should also not be deployed in congregational worship from time to time, though I grant that care should be taken, out of concern for the conscience of the weaker brother and sister.

In the use of this type of gift, I believe, too, that there should be room for the air or lyric which is spontaneously composed at the time of worship under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If any of this should seem strange or shocking, I would say only that they seem to me to be possibilities which are implicit in the principles of spontaneous worship as pioneered by the early Brethren (among other groups). It is surely not to be supposed that the *full* possibilities were revealed to them. They were children of their times, and past and familiar practice was bound to limit their understanding, as it will ours. Often in spiritual practice, it will be for us, under the guidance of the Spirit, to take up the trail from the point reached by others.

In encouraging the exercise of these gifts, congregational leaders should be careful to enjoin on the people concerned a number of important principles. First, they need to understand the need to refine and develop their particular gifts for the benefit of the congregation, just as the teacher needs to prepare himself spiritually and technically (1 Tim 4:14-15); in the case of a musical ensemble this implies collective preparation as well as individual preparation. Second, as already noted, it is not simply a matter of technical proficiency. Spiritual preparation is important, and adequate time needs to be given to worship as well as practice. Third, and most important, instrumentalists, vocalists and lyricists *must* understand clearly that their task in worship is *not* to *perform* to the congregation. It is, rather, both to lead and help the assembled company as a whole to worship before the throne of God. It follows, therefore, that the hearts and minds of musicians and singers should be directed towards the Lord, rather than

towards the congregation ('it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD'—2 Chron 5:13). This is often a hard lesson for musicians to learn who have been brought up in the post-Enlightenment tradition of musical performance. Fourth, there is the point of the subtle relation between musicians and the rest of the congregation. The task is not to accompany or to follow; it is to lead and help. There are many congregations whose worship is impaired, either because musicians will not shoulder properly the responsibility of leading song, or because they dominate the proceedings to such an extent that it becomes a struggle between them and the rest of the congregation. Where, however, the ministry is properly exercised there are great benefits in prospect: in Solomon's temple, it was the presence of the glory of God (2 Chron 5:13–14).

Blending spiritual gifts in leading worship

'When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.' The purpose of the exercise of spiritual gifts is to build up (1 Cor 14:3, 26), for the common good as just noted, and finally to express unity (1 Cor 12:12; see also Eph 4:3–6, 16). It follows therefore that, the multiple exercise of gift notwithstanding, worship should amount to a satisfying unity, expressing the unity of the Spirit with the Father and the Son (John 17:20–26). Free or spontaneous worship should not be a series of disparate contributions; if it is, it calls into question the reality of what is claimed to be taking place. A special burden rests with those who lead worship, with those who lead singing, with musicians and singers, and everyone else who takes part prominently, to give expression to that unity. To achieve that, they need to be especially conscious of the leading of the Holy Spirit not only within themselves, but in each other and in the gathering as a whole. It calls for teamwork in which under God they seek to blend their various gifts for the benefit of the whole. They must be prepared to respond to each other's leadership. The president or the principal leader must be ready to give place to another who believes that he or she has from the Lord something which is critically necessary to the gathering at that particular point. Especially, worship leaders and musicians need to seek to blend their contributions to give a clear and flowing lead to the gathering as a whole.

CONCLUSION

'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How

unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways. "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.' (Rom 11:33-36). If the object of worship is to experience the presence of this God, we cannot expect that it will be possible to tie him down with formularies on the one hand, or with particular methods, techniques and practices on the other. He will reveal himself as he chooses. Fearfully, it is always possible to manufacture in the energy of the flesh something that will pass, even among Christians, for true Christian worship. Moreover, it may not be wise simply to try to copy what other Christians do. For them, they may be worshipping in spirit and in truth. For us the same arrangements and practices may simply be a counterfeit. Quite apart from principle, this may simply be a matter of practicality. For example, what is appropriate in a gathering of 200 or 1,000 worshipping Christians may not be at all relevant or practicable in a gathering of 20. Within the general framework of scriptural teaching on worship it is for the individual gathering to seek to use the gifts among it so as to give authentic expression to the worship of God.

If scripture is viewed as a whole, it becomes clear that corporate worship and individual prayer can take many different outward forms, varying with place, time and culture. It is the object of worship which is of abiding importance: to experience the Lord in reality and to respond to him in adoration and commitment with all that that implies. Happily, we have numerous models in scripture which indicate for us something of the character of true worship, for example, in the Psalms, in passages in the prophets like Isaiah 12 and Ezekiel 1, and in the book of Revelation. The task of the congregation is to seek that authentic experience of the Lord. We must wait upon the Lord for this experience of himself. But it is my conviction that we do not need to lie idly on the hillside like the poet waiting for the muse. In Christian thinking, seeking is a more active mode than that. As I have suggested, there is much that congregational leaders can and should do to help the Christian community in the quest.

Footnotes

- 1 See Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, (Marshall, Morgan & Scott 1974) 28-65.
- 2 Incidentally, it might be pointed out that there is no reason in our day why mid-week house groups for worship, prayer, Bible study and fellowship should be construed as inevitably divisive or outside the authority of the congregation. That anxiety derives, I suspect, from a distinction between corporate and private activity which has more to do with Victorian notions of the Englishman's

home as his castle than it does with the New Testament—though of course where such notions are strongly held there might be good reason for caution about the development of groups which might be outside effective regulation by the congregation.

- 3 On this process, see John Tiller with Mark Birchall, *The Gospel Community and its Leadership*, (Marshall Pickering 1987) 1–51.
- 4 F Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement*, (Paternoster Press, second edition, 1976) 125–126, 128, 139–140; H H Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren, 1825–1850*, (Pickering & Inglis 1967) 227–228.
- 5 See C S Dessain, *John Henry Newman*, (Thomas Nelson 1966), in particular the material cited from *Parochial and Plain Sermons* on pp 17–21.
- 6 So C K Barrett: ‘a fresh, perhaps spontaneous, composition, not an Old Testament psalm, is intended’ *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, second edition, (A & C Black 1971) 327.