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A Reflection from the Book  
“Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity”

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## Christian Worship and Culture

# A Reflection from the Book “Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity”

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### **Introduction**

This paper will speak generally on how Christian Worship and igneous culture could be merges, to bring about the possibility of undertaking mission in the local context. This is a reflection on the book.

### **Definition of Worship**

- Worship is the heart and pulse of the Christian Church. In worship we celebrate together God’s gracious gifts of creation and salvation, and are strengthened to live in response to God’s grace. Worship always involves actions, not merely words. To consider worship is to consider music, art, and architecture, as well as liturgy and preaching.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beale G.K., *We Become What We Worship* (Downers Grove, IVP Academic,2008)

- The reality that Christian worship is always celebrated in a given local cultural setting draws our attention to the dynamics between worship and the world's many local cultures.<sup>2</sup>
- Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways. First, it is trans-cultural, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture. Second, it is contextual, varying according to the situation (both nature and culture). Third, it is counter-cultural, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture. Fourth, it is cross-cultural, making possible sharing between different local cultures. In all four dynamics, there are helpful principles which can be identified.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Worship as Trans-Cultural***

The resurrected Christ whom we worship, and through whom by the power of the Holy Spirit we know the grace of the Triune God, transcends and indeed is beyond all cultures. In the mystery of his resurrection is the source of the trans-cultural nature of Christian worship. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the sacraments of Christ's death and resurrection, were given by God for the world. There is one Bible, translated into many tongues, and biblical preaching of Christ's death and resurrection has been sent into the world. The fundamental shape of the principal Sunday act of Christian worship, the Lord's Supper, is shared across cultures: the people gather, the

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<sup>2</sup> LWF, *Christian worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (Geneva, Lutheran World Federation, 1996), p24

<sup>3</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, 24

word of God is preached, the people intercede for the needs of the Church and the world, the Lord's Supper is shared, and the people are sent out into the world for mission. The great story of Christ's birth, death and resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit and our baptism into him, provide the central meanings of the trans-cultural times of the church's year: especially Lent/Easter/Pentecost, Advent/Christmas/Epiphany.<sup>4</sup> The ways in which the shape of the Sunday Eucharist and the church year are expressed vary by culture, but their meaning and fundamental structures are shared around the globe. There is one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism and one Eucharist.<sup>5</sup>

Several specific elements of Christian liturgy are also trans-cultural, e.g. readings from the Bible, the creeds and the Lord's Prayer, and Baptism in the Name of Triune God.<sup>6</sup>

### *Worship as Contextual*

- Jesus whom we worship was born into a specific culture of the world. In the mystery of his incarnation are the model and the mandate for the contextualization of Christian worship. God can be and is encountered in the local cultures of our world. A given culture's values and patterns, insofar as they are consonant with the values of the Gospel, can be used to express the meaning and purpose of Christian worship.

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<sup>4</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, 24-25

<sup>5</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, 24-25

<sup>6</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, 25

Contextualization is a necessary task for the Church's mission in the world, so that the Gospel can be ever more deeply rooted in diverse local cultures.<sup>7</sup>

- Among the various methods of contextualization, that of dynamic equivalence is particularly useful. It involves re-expressing components of Christian worship with something from local culture that has equal meaning, value and function. Dynamic equivalence goes far beyond mere translation; it involves understanding the fundamental meanings both of elements of worship and of the local culture, and enabling the meanings and actions of worship to be re-expressed in the local language.<sup>8</sup>

For example, instead of using western Christmas trees (pine trees), we might use a 'banana tree', symbolic of 'fruitfulness and blessing'. Iban harvest festivals use home-made 'banana tree' decorations (Ranyai), cakes and soft drinks as symbols of thanksgiving.

- On the side of culture, it is understood that not everything can be integrated into Christian worship: only those elements that are of the same nature within the liturgical order. Elements borrowed from local culture should always undergo critique and purification, which can be achieved through the use of biblical typology.<sup>9</sup>

For example, a woven blanket (Pua Kumbu) may be used as an altar covering, but care needs to be exercised, as the 'Pua

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<sup>7</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p 25

<sup>8</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p 25-26

<sup>9</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p 26

Kumbu' is a ritual blanket used for religious ceremonies, festivals (Gawai), ceremonies associated with birth, death, healing or "soul searching" and headhunting. It serves as a means of communication between this world and the world of the ancestors, spirits and gods.<sup>10</sup>

Special attention and prayer is necessary, to dedicate it for God's use. If not, those who are still weak may be tempted to fall, as St Paul reminds us in his letter to the believers in Corinth (1Cor 8:9-12)

### ***Worship as Counter-Cultural***

Jesus Christ came to transform all people and all cultures, and calls us not to conform to the world, but to be transformed within it (Romans 12:2) In the mystery of His passage from death to eternal life is the model for transformation, and thus for the counter-cultural nature of Christian worship.<sup>11</sup>

Some components of every culture in the world are sinful, dehumanizing and contradictory to the values of the Gospel. From the perspective of the Gospel, they need critique and transformation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Edric Ong, *Mystic Iban Textiles of Malaysian Borneo* ( Malaysia Arts and Crafts Society of Sarawak)

<sup>11</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p27

<sup>12</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p27

## ***Worship as Cross-Cultural***

Jesus came to be the Savior of all people. He welcomes the treasures of earthly cultures into the city of God. By virtue of Baptism, there is one church; and one means of living in faithful response to Baptism is to manifest ever more deeply the unity of the church. The sharing of hymns and arts, or other elements of worship, across cultural barriers, helps to enrich the whole church and strengthen the sense of the communion of the church.<sup>13</sup>

Care should be taken that the music, art, architecture, gestures and postures, and other elements of different cultures are understood and respected when they are used by churches elsewhere in the world.<sup>14</sup>

### **Challenge to the church today**

We call on all churches to:

- undertake further efforts related to the trans-cultural, contextual, counter-cultural and cross-cultural nature of Christian Worship.
- recover the centrality of Baptism, Scriptural preaching and the celebration of the Lord's Supper - the principal trans-cultural elements of Christian worship and the signs of Christian unity - as the strong centre of all congregational life and mission, and as the authentic basis of contextualization.

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<sup>13</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p27

<sup>14</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p27

- give serious attention to exploring local or contextual elements of liturgy, language, posture and gesture, hymnody and other music and musical instruments, art and architecture, for Christian worship, so that their worship may be more truly rooted in the local culture.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> LWF, *Christian Worship*, p28