

## **FULLY VERNACULAR WORSHIP – FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL**

**Dr Marcus Felde**

*Revd Dr Marcus Felde, M.Div. (Christ Seminary – Semihex),  
D.Min. (Christ Seminary – Semihex), Ph.D. (University of  
Chicago Divinity School), is the Dean of Studies at the  
Martin Luther Seminary in Lae.*

How do Christians in Papua New Guinea make decisions about how to worship?

How do we decide which language to use? How do we decide which songs to sing, which instruments to play? How do we decide the shape of our *haus lotu*? How do we decide when to stand up and sit down, and whether to kneel? How do we decide where to place an altar or table, and what colour cloth, if any, should cover it? How do we decide how often to celebrate communion?

How do we decide how long a sermon should be, and where it should be preached from? How do we decide whether to lift our hands or fold them when we pray? How do we decide what days to have worship, and what time of day to gather? How do we decide who sits where, and who does what? How do we decide what portions of scripture to read? How do we create a liturgy, or pick a liturgy to follow?

Not all corporate worship is liturgical. But all of it is patterned. The specific patterns we use are the products of more or less thoughtful, more or less conscious, decision-making by Christians obeying God's call to worship.

How do we decide what and how? One rule of thumb for the planning of worship is to do what we “always” did before. At its best, this principle ensures the transmission of the treasure of the past to the people of today. At its worst, it is a “monkey see, monkey do” attitude that perpetuates meaningless worship habits.

Another rule of thumb sometimes used in worship planning is “Let’s try something different!” The desire to do new things may empower renewal of worship, but it may also distract us from what matters, and fragment our community. We do not want to be “blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Eph 4:14).

We want our worship to be good, beautiful, meaningful, and sincere. We want to be true to scripture, and faithful to our Lord. How can we best do this?

The choices we make are telling. They say a lot about who we are. Do we want people to know what denomination we are? We will show them by our architecture, our songs, our liturgies, even by the day we worship. Do we want to identify with Christians of bygone days, or other continents? We will use symbols they have used, and pattern our gestures after theirs. Do we want to look like Papua New Guineans when we worship? Then we will have to incorporate elements of local culture into our services.

I am sorry to say, from my experience within the Lutheran church in Papua New Guinea, that worship is not in good shape, generally. There are many difficulties that arise from the mixing of many languages and cultures. But some other problems come from clinging to partial and inadequate solutions of the cultural difficulties. I hope that this paper will encourage Lutherans, and other Christians, to take more seriously the task of making their worship truly “at home” in Papua New Guinea. For it is my contention that the

contextualisation of our worship practices is demanded by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Contextualisation as an Evangelical Imperative**

I have been involved for the last four years in the Worship and Culture Study of the Lutheran World Federation.<sup>1</sup> During our studies, we have seen how Christian worship has been actualised in different cultures. We have also learned that, in every place, for assorted reasons, much more needs to be done. Yet the church is typically indifferent, or resistant to the change that seems to be needed.

Some of the resistance comes from misunderstanding about why contextualisation is necessary. There are those who feel that the introduction of local custom inevitably taints the gospel message with heathen overtones – and they fear this for good reason. Some suspect that it is sheer cultural romanticism that is the chief motivating factor behind contextualisation – and, in some cases, perhaps it is. Some people are so historically oriented when they think about what is good in worship that they cannot sympathise with anything “new”.

But even if some do it for wrong reasons, there are good and powerful reasons for making worship “at home” in every reasonable way. These reasons are related to the gospel. At least, they should be.

---

<sup>1</sup> The reports of this study have been published in two volumes, edited by S. Anita Stauffer, *Worship and Culture in Dialogue*, Geneva Sw: Department for Theology and Studies, The Lutheran World Federation, 1994, and *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, Geneva Sw: Department for Theology and Studies, The Lutheran World Federation, 1996.

As Anita Stauffer has said,<sup>2</sup> we want our worship to be both authentic and relevant. Too often we think of these values as being opposite to each other. When they are maintained as absolutes, they may be. But when each is subordinated to the gospel, and thought of as an evangelical principle, the two become compatible, even complementary, principles.

What is the gospel to which I keep referring? It is the message about what God has done in Jesus the Christ to retrieve for Himself the people He made to be His own in the first place. It is “the power of God for salvation”, in which “the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith” (Rom 1:16-17).

When we sit down to decide the big or little issues of worship, reference should always be made to that gospel. It is not enough merely to discuss issues in terms of who likes what, or whether something is boring or interesting, whether our denomination has a rule about it, or whether it has been done before. The decision must be held up against a theologically-careful understanding of the whole gospel.

This does not mean that other principles are to be disregarded. Quite the contrary. For example, it does not mean that every congregation may do whatever it likes. For the gospel is a word, with which God seeks “to gather into one of the dispersed children of God” (John 11:52). On the other hand, conformity is not to be enforced for its own sake, but for the sake of the gospel.

---

<sup>2</sup> S. Anita Stauffer, “Christian Worship: Toward Localisation and Globalisation”, in S. Anita Stauffer, ed., *Worship and Culture in Dialogue*, Geneva Sw: Department for Theology and Studies, The Lutheran World Federation, 1994, p. 11.

## **Cross-cultural Confusion**

Anyone who lives in a country with more than 700 languages is often going to have the experience of being unable to understand others. We also know the feeling of being misunderstood. I am aware that many jokes in Pidgin revolve around the issue of confused communications.

Confusion also plagues our worship practices. Let me give a pictorial example:

Picture #1 is a crude, quick sketch I made of a person at prayer. I meant it to be an elemental, easily-recognised symbol of worship. Note that, when I made the sketch, I unwittingly betrayed my cultural background by putting a kneeler under the knees of the person who was praying.

I then asked a student to look at my picture, and redraw it the best he could. His picture was given to a third person, who copied his. A fourth person, then a fifth, and a sixth, were given the same task. All were told specifically *not* to make their picture different, but to make it the same as the one they saw.

The result was revealing to me. The first student (picture #2) tried to draw the kneeler, but his picture was distorted enough that the next student drew no kneeler at all. After a few copies of copies, the person is no longer kneeling at all. He is squatting – a posture I have seen far more often than kneeling in PNG.

Furthermore, for me, the typical posture for prayer is to hold the hands upright. In the students' versions, the hands extend forward, in a manner more common for them.

The loss, or transformation, of meaning in this simple example is a tiny thing compared to the loss of meaning

when worship practices from “overseas” are imported wholesale into the PNG scene.

Early missionaries to Finschhafen taught German Lutheran chorales in four-part harmony to the young lads in their schools. The results were not very satisfying to anyone, it seems. The German missionaries believed that the chorale was the pinnacle of aesthetic perfection in spiritual music. But, to the local people, the performances were a dreadful noise.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side, a missionary, who was a good musician once told me that he could not abide the singing of the Enga people. “That’s not music!” he said.

Not only in the music of worship, but also in visual symbols, gestures, the “timetable” of worship, and every other way, the confusion between missionaries and local people, and between different local cultures have been myriad. Every aspect of worship, even if intended to be a vehicle of the gospel, in its own peculiar way, has been at times a source of misunderstanding.

From the beginning, missionaries knew that they needed to translate the Word of God into local languages. But what was often forgotten was that the Word of God speaks not only in words, but through things, arrangements, patterns, as well. These often went untranslated.

There are two great reasons why the “patterns and things” should be translated as well. First, for the sake of evangelism – that is, so that people may hear clearly, and with every sense, the good message about Jesus Christ. Secondly, for the praise of God – so that the same people

---

<sup>3</sup> Christian Keysser tells the story, in Christian Keysser, *A People Reborn*, Alfred Allin, and John Kuder, trans, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1980, pp. 89-94.

may have the means to confess that faith fully, and from their heart.

### **Contextualisation: The Better to Hear**

“How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?”, Paul asks in Romans 10.

In corporate worship, we gather, in order to hear the Word. This is of decisive importance for worship planning, as Paul demonstrates in 1 Corinthians 14. We assemble, in order to be “built up”, or “edified”, and this happens by hearing the Word. We don’t just hear it from a preacher, we hear it from each other (v. 26), and in many ways. “Let *all things* be done for building up” (v. 26).

If worship were nothing but self-expression to God, we might not have to worry about clarity and meaningfulness. God would understand. But since *all things* should be done for the sake of those gathered, we must. If we are doing things in worship that simply make no sense to those present – for example, hiding the altar behind a curtain until the opening of the service – the fact that they make no sense is a serious judgment on that practice.

For this reason, Paul opposes speaking in tongues in the assembly, when it is not interpreted. He prefers that what we do in the assembly be clear enough in meaning that, if an outsider enters, he will not think we are out of our minds (v. 23). He prefers that what happens be so clearly God’s word that a newcomer could step through the door, be struck by God’s clear word, and conclude that “God is really among you” (v. 25).

This rule should be applied, not only to the words of the sermon, but also to the music, the architecture, the way people dress for worship, the friendliness of the liturgy, the tone of the announcements, the ceremony around the giving

of offerings, the decoration of the altar – even the location, size, and architecture of the church.

Worship contextualisation means that we consider the values and meanings in our present worship, both implicit and explicit, and criticise them, in the light of the need to bring God's message clearly to the worshippers *in this place*. Worship contextualisation means that we must know the gospel, and also know how to convey its meanings, within the cultural context of the congregation. Unless we do so, "how will they hear?"

### **Contextualisation: the Better to Praise**

"The Word is near you, on your lips, and in your heart" (Rom 10:8). Paul is quoting Deut 30:14. But is the Word, in fact, near enough?

Paul teaches that, as an essential part of our life in Christ, we ourselves, with our own lips, and from our own hearts, express the faith: "Jesus is Lord".

Christian worship is an exercise, in which we are both givers and receivers, at the same time. Our confession of Jesus' Lordship, our praise of God's goodness, our recital of the mighty acts, by which He has saved His people, are the same words that (from the lips of our fellow Christians) are building us up. None of us, not even an ordained pastor, should ever feel he is only a giver, and not a receiver.

Our confession of faith is not only a one-time repetition of the line, "Jesus is Lord". The confession of faith, rather, fills and informs our whole lives. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21). The confession comes to its most-regular, disciplined expression in corporate worship. But, even there, it may be hypocritical.

Geoffrey Wainwright has discussed this in a most helpful way:

“There is another way of relating . . . what is confessed in words, what is believed in heart and mind, what is lived in everyday life. It is to say that belief and action *meet* in the liturgy. We may then talk in terms of opportunity rather than of problems. We can serve God, because He first serves us. Understood first, as God’s service to us, the liturgy becomes a focus, in which God’s gracious self-giving promotes the interiorisation of our faith, the articulation of our devotion, and the strengthening of our will for action.”<sup>4</sup>

Our confession of faith is not to be mere mimicry. We are not cockatoos calling “koki koki.” We are to confess with *our* lips, from *our* hearts. To underscore that point: Melanesians confess with Melanesian lips, from Melanesian hearts. Or, Dunas confess with Duna lips, from Duna hearts.

The means of expression available to people vary from place to place. Gothic cathedrals were a confession of faith, in one place, at one time. The use of gold in communion vessels may be, in some places, an appropriate act that concretises the confession of faith. Perhaps, for some people, but not for others, kneeling is the perfect posture for a contrite person.

Our hard task is to discover, in our own context, what means are available to facilitate the fullest possible expression, by the people of God, of the faith they have in our God who saves. We need to take “hearts” and “lips” in the fullest possible sense, and discover, among the values, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, “Doxology”, in *The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life*, New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 217, emphasis added.

patterns, the institutions of our own people, the -apt means for our worship of the Triune God.

### **Standards for Contextualisation**

The imperative to contextualise the cultural patterns of our worship is not a wild impulse. It must be moderated by other values, implied in the gospel, with which we identify.

Take, as an example, the church which I serve. It calls itself “The Evangelical Lutheran church – Papua New Guinea.” The name has three parts, in order of importance: “church”, “Evangelical Lutheran”, and “Papua New Guinea”. Each of these terms implies norms for the faith and life of this church.

Because, like other Christians, we are “church”, we are united with others by the Holy Spirit of God in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church”, which we profess in the Nicene Creed. Each of those adjectives is not only a given characteristic of the church, but also a standard for the church. We are to be what God has made us, and called us to be.

Each of those terms implies standards for our worship. “One”: it has been suggested that Christian worship, everywhere, should look enough the same that even a foreign Christian would recognise it. “Holy”: nothing in the service should bring the name of Christ into disrepute. “Catholic”: somehow the worship must unite our voices with those of all Christians, in every time and every place. “Apostolic”: the gospel, the word of the apostles, must be the normative proclamation in every gathering, for “My thoughts are not your thoughts, declares the Lord” (Is 55:8).

Secondly, we identify ourselves as “Evangelical Lutheran.” This implies, from our perspective, that we are prepared to serve the one church, as a reminder of the

centrality, and normative function, of the good news in the life of the church. To be faithful to this calling, we ought to be sure that our worship does not deny this. For example, if our worship descends into formalistic drudgery, and people come to church to satisfy a requirement – to placate an angry God – this would contradict our claim to be evangelical, in the tradition of Luther.

As I have shown, above, the fact that we are in Papua New Guinea also makes claims on our worship behaviour. For the sake of the gospel, we must criticise our present worship practices, when they present the gospel unintelligibly. If people are led to believe that, to be proper Christians, they must adopt Western music, dress, architecture, and language, then they have heard a false gospel.

I have used the ELC-PNG as an example, but what I have said is true for every denomination, and every locality of the church. Contextualisation must not be thought of as just another “new wind” that would blow us in the direction of worship that is stylistically local. It should be seen in the context of those other principles that govern our life as the church, as Christ’s body. The various principles are valuable tools, only when they are compelled to collaborate, for the sake of the gospel.

### **Towards Worship Contextualisation**

Worship contextualisation often happens without our conscious efforts. For example, some Western hymn tunes, that have been adopted in Papua New Guinea, have been altered to fit local aesthetic standards. Church buildings, with grass roofs, certainly did not come from America. Casualness about the starting time for *lotu* (worship) accommodates local realities.

But there are still many problems in present practice, and they will not go away of themselves.

First of all, there are elements in our worship that still seem to conflict with local meanings. For example, the congregation is asked to stand up for certain parts of the liturgy. Judging from the fact that many remain seated, even when the leader is quite insistent about his instructions, I would say that the practice is not well understood. In fact, I have heard some say that it makes no sense to associate “showing respect” with “standing up”. Perhaps that custom arose in societies with kings. Here, in Melanesia, people show respect in other ways.

Secondly, there have been few attempts to assimilate elements of local culture into the worship that local people offer. I am not referring to local values that clearly conflict with the gospel – for example, the necessity to take revenge on enemies. I mean, that when local culture *has* its own idiomatic way of representing a value that is present in Christian worship – for example, respect or hospitality – that way has not been utilised.

For example, there are many plants in the gardens of Papua New Guinea that bear rich symbolic significance. Ginger is strongly associated with healing. *Tanget* is planted at peace-making sessions. Bamboo, by its clustering, represents community. Coconut, and other foods, have had ritual significance at times when fellowship is celebrated – in welcoming strangers, for example.

Of course, these also have overtones that would not be welcome in the Christian assembly. But so did Christmas trees, the colour white, wine and bread, water, the guitar, many of the tunes we sing, and even a lot of the words we use: King, cross, blessed, etc. These, too, once were pagan.

But as Gordon Lathrop has shown,<sup>5</sup> the church has always made use of strong symbols from the local culture, at the same time “breaking” them to its own evangelical purpose. In this, the church is following Jesus, who transformed other washings into the baptism, with which we were baptised, and transformed another meal into the meal He gave to us.

## **Conclusion**

The word “vernacular” comes from the Latin word *verna*, which was what the Romans called a slave, who had been born in the master’s house. Such slaves would presumably have been precious (perhaps like the one in Luke 7:2) because they would not always be thinking about where they lived before, and also because they would truly “know the ropes”.

Christian worship will truly be “vernacular” in Papua New Guinea when its language, music, art, and patterns have been “born” here, and “live” to serve our Lord. We are a long way yet from seeing this happen. But, with the power of the Spirit that worked at Pentecost to make each one hear in his own language, it can happen.

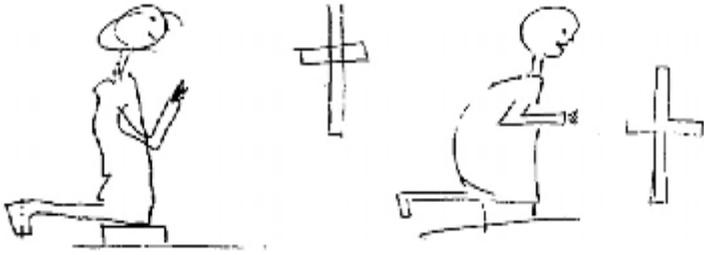
The illustration I used at the beginning to show confusion may also illustrate how this can happen. Yes, the students got my drawing mixed up. But, if they had planned carefully, they might have done the same thing. For, under the influence of the cross, they retained the core idea, while exchanging an alien cultural pattern for an indigenous one.

---

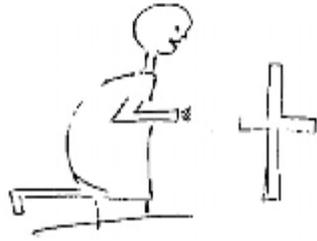
<sup>5</sup> I am referring especially to his article, Gordon Lathrop, “Baptism in the New Testament and its Cultural Settings”, in S. Anita Stauffer, ed., *Worship and Culture in Dialogue*, Geneva Sw: Department for Theology and Studies, The Lutheran World Federation, 1994, pp. 17-38. But the theme runs through all of his articles in the same volume, as well as Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: a Liturgical Theology*, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993.

The person in the drawing remained, in each interpretation, a person at prayer.

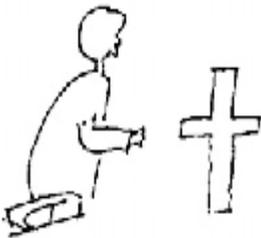
In a similar way, if our contextualisation of worship is directed, and dominated, by a desire to serve Christ, we will achieve a more fully-vernacular style of worship, which is, at the same time, more faithful to the gospel.



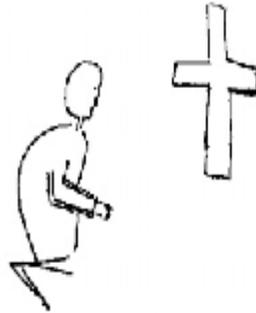
**1**



**2**



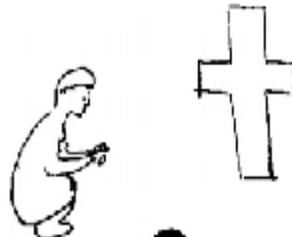
**3**



**4**



**5**



**6**