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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



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Classical Worship for Today: *The Fuel of Hospitable Worship*



Wilbur Ellsworth



NAUGHTY LITTLE THEOLOGICALLY MINDED CHILDREN

Most people come to Christian faith and into the life of the church because a friend has helped them find the way. That is not new information. Yet many of us must confess that we have few relationships in our neighborhoods, workplaces and even in our extended families that can bear the weight of that kind of ministry. Throughout this past year I have used this space to describe and plead for a return to classical Christian worship, for worship in the Great Tradition. I have tried to make the case that "seeker-sensitive" worship, with its sincere desire to introduce people to Christ and his kingdom, seems in reality to be more "shopper-sensitive" worship, where the demand for instantly understandable and satisfying religious experience diminishes the possibility of exploring and entering into worship in the Great Tradition. This kind of worship reflects popular culture more than the roots and patterns of worship laid down both in Scripture and in the Spirit's guidance of the church through the centuries.

So then, how are we to think about worship and evangelism if the worship we embrace seems remote from the interests and tastes of so many? We have to work harder, build better bridges and in the end, burn brighter for worship that exalts God and lifts up people to fulfill their calling as images of the living God. We need to accept the reality that a culture

going deeper into secular patterns of thought, emotion and choice is going to require more if it is going to be brought back to the faith and the worship "once for all delivered to the saints."

The story of Gideon in Judges 7 created a vision in the apostle Paul's own life that he gave to the Corinthian church in his second letter. In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul makes a striking connection between the strange story of Gideon using just three hundred men with trumpets and torches inside clay jars as a description of ministry in the new covenant. In using this Old Testament story Paul makes it clear that new covenant ministry is always warfare, but warfare of a different kind. All new covenant ministry is warfare that requires *boldness*, *brokenness* and *blessing*. These three elements suggest components of the Christian love of the stranger that can break open the glory of God in the sight of people who are entrenched in the vision and pursuits of the world. Paul's vision of new covenant ministry offers a pattern for loving the stranger that may encourage him toward biblically-rooted worship.

First, loving the stranger to discover worship in the Great Tradition requires *boldness*, a prominent characteristic of early Christians. Some nine times the book of Acts describes the early gospel messengers as speaking with boldness and praying for boldness. This word describes a quality of freedom and lack of inhibition that conceals and passes over nothing. When we consider the danger and opposition these early Christians faced in their witness to Christ, we can understand that this was not a cheap boldness that was insensitive and uncaring about the thoughts and feelings of other people. It was a confidence and a conviction that was able to stand before the pressure of strong and even fatal opposition. Love that accepts the risk and the struggle of engaging people to become worshipers of Jesus Christ as the Lord of Glory requires a deep freeing confidence that is born from the experience of standing in the worship history of Israel and the church. Boldness requires the experience of the fire within the clay vessel. Gideon's small band of soldiers most likely would never have risked getting so close to the enemy camp if they

had not been sure that within their jars there was bright and glowing fire.

All this is to say that before the church can call others to worship we must learn to enter into the glory ourselves, to be awed by it, to be humbled and cleansed by it and to receive the grace of God's presence that burns in our hearts. David prayed in Psalm 26:8, "O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells." This love in David's soul was forged through the discipline of testing and refining. He had known what it was to turn to lesser beauty and lower pleasure, but now he cries, "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple" (Psalm 27:4). Before the church can call others to worship we must have responded to God's call to worship him ourselves. We will have to learn to re-examine the rootless, though sincere, efforts of a reconstructed contemporary worship that has either cast off or never even learned the "old paths" of God's people. This must happen before we can hope for confident boldness that comes only from experiencing the burning glory of God's presence in our own lives. Today this means Christians will have to examine their own cultural inclinations and then nurture their children to understand the riches of the church's worship life and tradition. For many, this confidence in the fire of God's glory in worship will begin with humble and patient working within the family. Our children who have not been nurtured in the Great Tradition cannot be expected to embrace it easily. As Paul thought of the ministry of the new covenant he recognized the danger of "selling" the message of Christ by calculated methods that win acceptance by culturally and emotionally appealing means but fail to present the glory of God in the fullness of his revelation to the church. Only divine means can achieve divine purposes. Confidence in the fire inside the earthen vessel is always the first step in moving out to advance the message of Christ to people who are outside.

Second, loving the stranger to discover worship in the

Great Tradition requires *brokenness*. When we have been filled with God's glory in worship we have received a treasure that God intends for us to humbly share with others. What we treasure, God wants us to give away. It is always sad to see a church of fulfilled worshipers going out with little passion to draw others to experience this same treasure. Personal satisfaction, inner healing, brighter vision of God's great goodness and beauty are wonderful treasures, but God gives them to us as a stewardship and often that stewardship requires brokenness. For some, this worship can be so intense that it is a sacrifice even to express to someone else what it means to them, especially when the other person seems likely to hold it in little regard. Beyond that, in our contentious "worship war" climate we are reluctant to invite others to share in what we have experienced for fear their rejection may diminish our own joy. Both of these concerns call us to be willing to allow "the jar" of our own ease and pleasure to be broken.

Further, we may find some who desire to enter into deeper worship but don't understand the way the church has pursued this goal through the centuries. This requires grace for humble and patient explanation and listening. Many people, including Christians for whom worship in the Great Tradition is a new experience, fail to perceive the glory that is found in it. Transcendence and majesty are not commonly valued or understood in our society. Initial reactions often evoke words like "formal," "starchy," and "irrelevant," into the discussion. Of course, we must always consider whether or not at least some of these observations may be true, but beyond that, we need the humility and patience to meet people's perceptions with an alternative. We can begin by pointing out the innate elements of worship that we can discern both from Scripture and the history of the church. When we encounter negative reactions we must listen patiently and thoughtfully to the concerns of those we are trying to persuade. In our consumer culture we are all trapped by the common idea that even something as transcendent as worship should first conform to our ideas and tastes. Frequently people who encounter historical Christian worship for the first time react by objecting,

"But I don't like it!" and they consider the matter closed as they move on in their search. They fail to understand that a service of worship in the Great Tradition has profound significance in every element. Further, the progression of the service from beginning to end has a sweep that makes demands of intent and intensity we are not used to. Worship requires a rigorous orientation and unrelenting personal involvement. Every part of our being must be involved in true worship and that is an investment few of us are used to making in any activity of life. Calling people back to the fullness of worship in the Great Tradition is demanding, for it is a call to an essential aspect of discipleship itself. This means loving people, listening to people, and accepting their feelings and ideas with quiet patience while seeking to orient them to what the church essentially has been doing for nearly 2000 years.

Finally, loving the stranger to discover worship in the Great Tradition requires *blessing*. Personal boldness gained from the inner fire of God's glory in worship, and brokenness in extending ourselves in humble and patient explanation will only be made fruitful by the blessing of God. As Paul thought about serving the Corinthian Christians his mind went back to the story of Gideon and his band of three hundred. They had shown great confidence in their shouting, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" They had broken their jars so that the light of the flame shone into the darkness of the night. They blew trumpets to rouse the enemy from sleep, but only when the Lord acted and turned the enemy upon themselves did victory come. Ultimately, the only vindication of worship is the presence of God who comes down to meet with his people, when the Spirit makes the presence of the Lord Jesus known. When we have confidence from experiencing Christ's presence among us and when we relate this experience to others as broken jars of humility and patience, we are making the path for Christ to come to others in worship.

One of the burdens of ministry today is that our culture is far removed from the values and joys that make people receptive to worship in the Great Christian Tradition. Pop songs, sentimental stories and focus on personal comfort have taken

priority over reverence and awe and have made the path to experiencing historic worship more difficult, but the rigor of climbing higher in worship in the Great Tradition deeply satisfies those willing to overcome the obstacles to understanding and self-discipline. The reward of learning to worship God in the ways of his Word and his church fulfills our humanity. Worship calls us to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and minds and strength. Loving the stranger and guiding him to this experience means accepting the service of welcome and orientation to a greater world than our present culture even imagines. It is the world of God's eternal kingdom. It is the strange delight of experiencing heaven on earth. When we come to the feast of worship in the Great Tradition, God calls us to love other people enough to help them to come to the banquet as well.

Author

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In church history the idea of the early church has theological as well as historical significance. A theological evaluation sees in it the true church, whose teaching and forms have an authoritative character. Agreement with it guaranteed not only one's own orthodoxy but also the character of catholicity of one's church. Since the church did not remain unchanged though the centuries, the question of the limits of the early church as the true church unavoidably arises.

EKKEHARD MÜHLENBERG,
THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 2

By Justin Martyr's time (d. ca. 165), a reasonably fixed liturgical service was in place. The "president" was responsible for leading the prayers, giving the instruction, and conducting the Lord's Supper, but there was room left for improvisation.

THOMAS HALTON

The just order of the creed demanded that the church should follow after the Trinity as a house after its dweller, a temple after its god, a city after its founder. The whole church is to be understood here, not only that part which is on pilgrimage on the earth . . . but also that part which is always in heaven.

AUGUSTINE, *THE ENCHIRIDION*

The church of Christ, zealous and cautious of the dogmas deposited with it, never changes any phase of them. It does not diminish them or add to them; it neither trims what seems necessary nor grafts things superfluous.

VINCENT OF LERINS, *A COMMONITORY*