

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

DAVID FERGISSON, PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY,
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

In a lecture I once attended, Stephen Sykes lamented the way in which the doctrine of ministry was treated as an inferior locus. For many years, he claimed, it was not taught in the Divinity Faculty of Cambridge. Being of second-order importance, it was left to the church colleges to consider. Similar remarks could be said of the theology of worship. It is not treated as a major locus in most textbooks, while in its Scottish setting, along with much else, it has traditionally fallen between the disciplines of systematic and practical theology.

Nonetheless, if the subject of worship has suffered from theological neglect in the past, this is less true today. It is now referred to frequently, particularly in an American post-liberal context, and in the recent work of Geoffrey Wainwright there is even an attempt to construct an entire systematics from the perspective of worship.¹ There are several reasons for this and by listing these under four headings – history, philosophy, ethics and ecumenism – some initial insight into the theology of worship can be gained.

THE STUDY OF DOCTRINE IN THE CONTEXT OF WORSHIP

History

The study of the history of doctrine reveals the way in which doxological practices preceded and shaped the formation of dogma. Without asserting an absolute priority of doxology over dogma, one can acknowledge the importance of worship in shaping Christian belief. This is already true of Hebrew religion where, in the Psalms, the celebration of salvation history, law, divine rule and wisdom all contribute to the shaping of Israel's faith. Similarly the elaborate sacrificial system and holiness code reveal long-standing practices which condition faith and belief in, for example, atonement for sin. New Testament scholarship has also made us aware of those credal fragments in the letters of Paul and elsewhere which reflect

¹ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: A Systematic Theology* (London, 1980).

established usage in early Christian worship, for example the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2.² Theology was decisively shaped by a range of practices such as praying to Jesus, baptism in the threefold name, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper as recorded in 1 Corinthians 11. In the patristic period, the development of dogma was also influenced by established practice.³ Thus in the Arian controversy, Athanasius could appeal to the widespread practice of praying to Jesus. Against Pelagius, Augustine could cite the practice of baptising infants for remission of sin. Anselm's theory of the atonement invoked the categories of the church's penitential system, while eucharistic controversies in the middle ages were determined by the language of the liturgy. One would also have to view mariology and the subsequent dogmatic definition of the immaculate conception and bodily assumption of Mary in light of entrenched practices of devotion that first emerge in the patristic period. In all this, however, it is not merely a matter of doctrine tracking widespread practice. Critical doctrinal reflection can act as a corrective upon our doxological habits.

Philosophy

The work of the later Wittgenstein has been interpreted and deployed by theologians in a range of ways, not all of which are consistent. But one widely recognised contribution of Wittgenstein is the stress on practice and forms of life in the acquisition of meaning. When a builder shouts 'slab' to his colleague he is not engaging in a simple act of naming, as Wittgenstein's earlier work had suggested.⁴ Instead he is issuing an instruction about how and when to deliver the next slab to his colleague who is laying them in a particular order. The salient point of this illustration is that meanings are only acquired through initiation into the practice and forms of life that shape the world of the building site. Words are not learned by looking out at the world and receiving examples of how to label the objects of experience. Learning takes place through action, exchange and participation in a complex set of rule-governed practices. Instead of a detached visual recognition, meaning is grasped through touch and sound in complex, communal activity.

² For discussion of the significance of worship in the New Testament see Larry Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship* (Carlisle, 1999).

³ This is revealed for example in Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100-600) (Chicago, 1971).

⁴ This example is drawn from *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 8-10.

These observations about meaning are significant for an account of theological knowledge. We know God not so much by attaching labels to experiences, events or phenomena but through participation in a range of rule-governed practices and forms of life. Another way of expressing this is to say that we can only speak of a knowledge of God in terms of exposure to and immersion in the life of the community. This will typically require catechesis, baptism and commitment to regular practice in the love of God and love of one's neighbour.

On this account of meaning, we now become better placed to appreciate the integral connection of worship to a practical knowledge of God. The worship of the community informs our knowledge of God. We are initiated into ways of seeing the world, ourselves and other people, that are theologically significant. Without the regular patterns of worship, the language of faith and its modes of perception will make little or no sense to us. This is a central theme of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, one of the most influential texts of the last 20 years.⁵ We learn faith in a way analogous to a child learning its first language. Experience and belief, too long abstracted from worship in theology, are now seen to repose upon the practices of the worshipping community.

Ethics

Recent return to Aristotelian virtue ethics in both philosophy and theology has brought a renewed stress upon the importance of habit in the moral life. We act well typically through the development of good habits. These require formation through acknowledgement of the texts, authorities, traditions, and practices of the Christian community. The most important single voice here has been that of Stanley Hauerwas. Training in the Christian life, he argues, requires induction into the practices of worship, familiarity with the examples and stories of the saints, and the reorientation of one's life by the claims of Christ and his church. This is stressed in a counter-cultural spirit. The distinctiveness of Christian living requires attention to the ways in which the worship, fellowship, belief and moral witness of the church reshape our lives.

It has been pointed out that there is a Catholic moment in the ethics of Hauerwas and this is certainly true. The attention given to the authority of the church, the lives of the saints and the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition positions this style of Christian ethics much closer to Roman Catholicism than the neo-liberal Protestant views it typically criticises. On the other hand, the writings of Hauerwas need also to be seen in the context of

⁵ *The Nature of Doctrine* (London, 1985).

Reformed emphases upon personal holiness, the Christian life, the discipline of the church community and the transformation of society. The influence of John Howard Yoder and the radical reformation is also apparent in his work and enables him to describe himself as a High Church Methodist with Mennonite leanings. We should note that many of Hauerwas' recent essays are published sermons. These reflect a commitment to the power of the preached Word to change the lives of its hearers. It is through the regular practice of communal worship that we are trained to live as God's people in the world.

The church is the visible, political enactment of our language of God by a people who can name their sin and accept God's forgiveness and are thereby enabled to speak the truth in love. Our Sunday worship has a way of reminding us, in the most explicit and ecclesial of ways, of the source of our power, the peculiar nature of our solutions to what ails the world.⁶

The work of Hauerwas should be seen in the same post-liberal paradigm as Lindbeck. It is developed in a range of writings from a group of theologians. In a discussion of pastoral care, Willimon points to the importance of worship in consoling, healing, and renewing us amidst the crises of life. He appeals to worship as central to what makes Christian pastoral care different from other secular forms of counselling and therapy.⁷ Miroslav Volf, in a recent collection of essays, speaks of belief-shaped practices and practice-shaping beliefs to describe the integrity of doing and believing in the Christian life.

Christian practices have what we may call an 'as-so' structure: *as* God has received us in Christ, *so* we too are to receive our fellow human beings. True, the way in which Christ's life is exemplary has to be carefully specified. Above all, the important difference between Christ and other human beings should counter both the temptation to supplant Christ and the presumption that human beings can simply 'repeat' Christ's work. But in an appropriately qualified way, in relation to the

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, 1993), p. 171. In similar vein, Sam Wells has sought to describe the range of ways in which worship is ethically formative. 'How Common Worship Forms Local Character', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 15 (2002), pp. 66-74.

⁷ William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, 1979).

practice of hospitality as well as in relation to all other practices, we must say: 'As Christ, so we.'⁸

Ecumenism

The ecumenical movement has also made a contribution to the renewed sense of the importance of worship for Christian doctrine. Through study of shared practices a greater sense of ecumenical convergence has been achieved, even where this has not yielded structural unity. This has been fostered by biblical scholarship and historical study of church traditions.

One example is the process which led to the formulation of 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry', the Lima document of 1982. In particular, the section on the eucharist makes significant ecumenical progress by shifting attention away from rival theories of the real presence by focussing on the wider context of eucharistic worship. This was achieved in part through the liturgical reform movement and the creation of an ecumenical order of service for the celebration of the eucharist. The eucharist is set within the context of divine worship broadly considered. It contains most, if not all, of the following elements: praise; confession of sin; declaration of pardon; proclamation of the Word; confession of the faith; intercession for church and world; words of institution; anamnesis; epiklesis; commemoration of the faithful departed; prayer for the coming of the kingdom; the Lord's Prayer; the sign of peace; praise; blessing and sending. The stress on the ecumenical sharing of these aspects of eucharistic worship has contributed to a process in which historical differences are minimised, although the encyclical *Dominus Iesus* reminds us that we have still some way to travel.

THEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE FORMS OF WORSHIP

The task here is to offer a description of worship, which is informed both by its centrality for Christian belief and practice, and also by the central credal affirmations of the faith. We should think in this context of 'description' rather than 'definition'. The attempt to define worship as if it were one single thing or activity and then to organise everything else around this is liable to cause distortion. This is a mistaken strategy for it will tend to offer an account that misses vital elements.

Attention to linguistic study of the various terms for 'worship' in its biblical and post-canonical usage is necessary but not sufficient for the

⁸ Miroslav Volf, 'Theology for a Way of Life', *Practicing Theology*, Miroslav Volf & Dorothy C. Bass (eds), (Grand Rapids, 2002), p. 250.

construction of a theology of worship. The Hebrew verb *shachah* is most commonly used to describe the activity of divine worship. It refers to the act of bowing down or rendering obeisance to whom it is due. In the Greek New Testament, the verb *proskuneo* is used in many places with much the same sense of bowing down. *Latreuo* is also employed several times for public worship, and denotes the idea of offering service. Church worship is thus described as service; we still talk about the church service in English or the *Gottesdienst* in German. The English term 'worship' itself derives from an Anglo-Saxon word for 'honour' (*weorthscipe*) and indicates that worship is an action of honouring one who is worthy. It can be used of persons other than God in different contexts. Thus, using archaic English, we might address 'the Worshipful the Mayor'. A better known example is found in the order for the solemnization of matrimony in the Book of Common Prayer. Upon placing the ring on his wife's finger, the husband says 'With this I ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.' (The use of the term 'worship' in this context gives the lie to those who insist that Christian marriage is an irredeemable patriarchal act by which a man assumes proprietorial control of a woman's body. One can properly 'worship' one's partner in marriage, but never one's worldly goods.)

In much confessional writing, the biblical sense of honouring the divine majesty is prominent. We see this in the description of God in the Westminster Confession of Faith. 'To [God] is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them' (III.2). In the Reformation criticism of idolatry in the church, the honouring of God alone is frequently stressed in the exposition of the first table of the Decalogue. So the Shorter Catechism informs us that 'The First Commandment forbiddeth the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying, the true God as God, and our God; and the giving of that worship and glory to any other which is due to him alone' (Answer 47).

All this must find a place in a theology of worship, yet the honouring of God is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for an adequate description of worship. There are several reasons for this. We can honour and acknowledge God in ways that extend beyond worship, for example in our daily work, in the life of the household, in political and social activity. It is the particular form that this honouring takes which requires articulation in a theology of worship. Worship, moreover, involves a wide range of activities not all of which are entirely captured by the notion of acknowledging or honouring God. The range of forms cited in the New Testament should recall us to this diversity as should the practice of the

synagogue. Indeed the Psalms already attest the variety of functions fulfilled by public worship; these include praise, thanksgiving, celebration, recounting, proclamation, confession, petition, instruction, and lament. While Christian practice has sometimes found difficulty in accommodating lament and complaint, all these other themes are generally present in the worship of the church.

WORSHIP AS AN ACTION IN WHICH GOD IS BOTH SUBJECT AND OBJECT

As an event in which God is not merely a passive recipient of our praise, worship creates an exchange between the divine and the creaturely in which God is the subject as well as the object of worship. The dramatic character of worship has often been portrayed by the Protestant account of preaching and by the Catholic description of the eucharist. The preaching of the Word is an event in which not only the preacher speaks but God addresses the people. It is this that bestows upon worship both a gravity and a joyfulness. Although we may not accept the medieval and Tridentine doctrine of transubstantiation and its accompanying account of ordination, we should recognise that in the description of the fraction at the altar there is an acute sense of the continual action of God in the regular worship of the church across space and time. Christ is re-presented to his people each time the sacrament of his body and blood is celebrated. We should add to this account of the dramatic character of worship recent charismatic awareness of the action of the Spirit in public worship. The criticism of mainstream western theology that it was too binitarian is not without force. A fuller account of the person and work of the Spirit should enhance the sense that the Spirit is active in prompting, guiding and enabling worship in all its dimensions.

Here then worship is characterised as a performative action in which both the church and God participate. It is not merely a human acknowledgement of who God is or what Christ has done. Worship is an event by which God is known and Christ communicated; it is not of our own making for it is dependent upon the grace of God. In this regard, the act of worship is not merely a human recollection or bearing witness although it includes these. It is also an event in which God's grace works for us in repeated, regular and dependable ways, albeit in a manner that refers us to the once for all action of Christ. We can appeal in this context to the priestly theology of the Hebrews and the claim that the ascended Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. Though difficult to formulate conceptually, this language implies that Christ continues

through the Spirit to intercede on our behalf. He continues to pray for and with us, even as we pray through him and in him. Worship here becomes the coincidence of divine and human action together.⁹

This can be a powerful and liberating insight, particularly at those moments when faith falters and our prayers become fitful. Simon Peter is told that though his faith will fail Christ has prayed for him. So also the ascended Christ continues through the Spirit to intercede for us. The awareness of Christ as the one who perpetually prays for us and also of the company of the faithful who surround us is a source of pastoral encouragement and liturgical strength. In reflecting upon the theology of Easter Saturday in the midst of his own terminal illness, Alan Lewis has written these moving words.

It was surely a terrible mistake of our fathers and mothers in the faith to make a person's deathbed state of mind the sole criterion of how he or she would stand beyond the grave before God's supposedly terrifying judgement. We face suffering, distress, and death with courage, faith and trust, not by maintaining serenity of psyche or buoyancy of soul within, but precisely by casting ourselves in all the times of emptiness, aridity, and wordlessness – as well as those still more spiritually dangerous times of optimism or elation – upon the gift of grace outside us and around us. God promises to do what we cannot do, and go where we need not go, to enter the dark valley ahead of us and defeat on our behalf the frightening foe. And the Spirit undertakes to pray for us, and stirs others to intercede on our behalf, just when we feel awful, overwrought in body or in spirit, when faith eludes intellect or consciousness and our tongues have lost all utterance.¹⁰

Nonetheless, in stressing this important point we should not overstate it so as to present worship as something that we do not do. Worship is not an intra-trinitarian transaction that takes place over our heads, unrelated to the practices of the visible, empirical congregations to which we belong. An over-stretched christomonism will lead to the enervating and implausible conclusion that in worship there is nothing much left for us to do.

To illustrate the performative character of worship, we might consider further the Psalms. It is generally assumed that these were memorised and

⁹ This is developed by James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle, 1996).

¹⁰ Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross & Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, 2001), pp. 430-31.

recited in worship before being committed to their present literary form.¹¹ In celebrating the kingly rule of God, the Psalms not only attest that rule but also contribute to it and participate in it. It is through the praise of Israel in part that God's rule over creation is exercised. Through a covenant partnership which is given expression in the form of worship, God wills to be known and obeyed. Thus in Psalm 24, though the ark of the covenant is no longer present, the enthronement of God in the praise of the post-exilic people is enacted. Here we see why worship must have a public character. Israel and the church are called into covenant partnership with God not as an aggregate of disconnected individuals, but as a people which in its corporate, social existence worships together. This does not exclude private acts of worship and devotion, but it seems to demand the centrality of the regular, public diet of worship on the Lord's Day in fulfilment of the fourth commandment. This public event has a dramatic quality by virtue of its character as both a divine and a human action. In his Aberdeen Gifford lectures, Barth writes,

[T]he church service is the most important, momentous and majestic thing which can possibly take place on earth, because its primary content is not the work of man but the work of the Holy Spirit and consequently the work of faith.¹²

REFORMED EXPOSITION OF WORSHIP UNDER THE RUBRICS OF WORD AND SACRAMENT

In much Reformed writing, the topic of worship is dealt with by reference to the two 'notes' of Word and sacrament. What takes place in worship is expounded by reference to the reading and preaching of God's Word and the right administration of the sacraments. We find this in confessions, catechisms and theological textbooks. Here much of the exposition is set within an initial context of sixteenth-century polemics.

The need to reform the life of the church according to the Word of God entailed a good deal of attention to the range of activities that take place in worship. Thus Bullinger's Second Helvetic Confession engages in a patient description of the tasks of the minister, the sacramental relation, baptism and the Lord's Supper, religious meetings, church architecture, the language of prayer, singing, canonical hours, holy days, fasts, catechizing, pastoral care of the sick, burial of the dead, ceremonies, rites and adiaphora – the things of indifference. In the Second Helvetic Confession, we have

¹¹ E.g. Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Edinburgh, 1989), p. 4.

¹² *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God* (London, 1938), p. 198.

the nearest thing to a comprehensive description of worship in the Reformed confessions.

Although it is permitted all men to read the Holy Scriptures privately at home, and by instruction to edify one another in the true religion, yet in order that the Word of God may be properly preached to the people, and prayers and supplication publicly made, also that the sacraments may be rightly administered, and that collections may be made for the poor and to pay the cost of all the Church's expenses, and in order to maintain social intercourse, it is most necessary that religious or Church gatherings be held. For it is certain that in the apostolic and primitive Church, there were such assemblies frequented by all the godly. (Chapter XXII)

Although this is a rather low-key and urbane account of worship, it is to be commended for its attention to detail and its strong sense of the local, empirical and visible congregation. It is broader in its scope than most Reformed accounts of worship, which focus more exclusively on Word and sacrament. These require some comment.

The attention to the preaching of the Word reflects several features of Lutheran and Reformed worship. These include the return to Scripture alone over against tradition as the supreme rule of faith and life; the importance of a right understanding of the faith which is also reflected in the translation of the Bible and the liturgy into the vernacular; the commitment to education shared with renaissance humanism; and also a polemic against the medieval notion of the sacraments as effective *ex opere operato* (by the sheer performance of the act) without reference to the faith of the recipient. In the response to all these concerns, the regular preaching and hearing of the Word became of paramount importance. For much Reformation theology, the preaching of the Word is characterised in sacramental language. For Luther, the Word of God could be described as present in, with and under the words of the preacher. For the Reformed tradition, the relationship is not described in terms of a consubstantiation but in terms of the capacity of the Spirit to speak through human words which have been properly applied to the proclamation of the Scriptures. Here there is an indirect identity of human and divine speech in a manner that again recalls sacramental language. By contrast, the Roman Catholic tradition has tended to construe the sermon more as a homily, a piece of instruction, subsidiary to the celebration of the mass.

This account of the Word contributed greatly to the dramatic and performative character of worship. Where the preacher speaks, there God too will address us. This attaches to preaching, together with the training

and preparation invested in it, the highest seriousness. In both Lutheran and Reformed writing this is evident.

We may well be amazed, but the concrete situation for the preacher actually is that when he goes up into the pulpit, a printed book lies before him. And that book must be the basis of his preaching, exactly as if it had 'fallen from heaven'.¹³

One can find scriptural support for preaching in the ministry of Jesus himself and in his command to preach the gospel. Yet the isolation of the sermon from other forms of oral communication has arguably become problematic in Reformed worship. In particular, the relative loss of both instruction and discussion has caused an undue constriction of worship in our tradition, and an isolation of the preaching of the Word which does it no service.¹⁴ From the beginning of its history, instruction in the faith was important for new converts. The risen Christ bids his disciples not only to preach but also to teach all that he commands. Jesus himself had been called a teacher, a rabbi, by those around him. And this didactic task was taken seriously by the early church in instruction about the foundational events of the faith and the catechizing of candidates for baptism. Instruction never assumed sacramental status, yet it is as prominent in the New Testament as either baptism or the Lord's Supper. Whether it takes place in or alongside the weekly diet of worship, it is clear that it is closely associated with the upbuilding of the community. Similar remarks can be made with respect to discussion. Conversation is a means of grace in the ministry of Jesus. One thinks of his private exchanges with the disciples, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. Moreover, empirical research suggests that many more people come to faith through personal conversation, discussion and exchange than through listening to sermons.¹⁵ We should not discount the role of para-church organisations in this respect – CU, SCM, SU, Methodist Societies, YMCA, SSC, Crusaders, Youth Fellowships – where the faith was actively discussed. These complemented and enriched the preaching of sermons. Their decline should be a matter of some concern, particularly at a time when we have become conscious of the counter-cultural significance

¹³ Rudolf Bultmann, 'On the Question of Christology', *Faith and Understanding* (London, 1969), p. 131.

¹⁴ Here I am indebted to Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, 1979), pp. 352ff.

¹⁵ E.g. John Finney, *Finding Faith* (Swindon, 1992).

of Christian formation. The ministry of the Word is not to be constricted, but must be set within wider patterns of communication in the church.

In the traditional exposition of the sacraments, we often find a generic definition of a sacrament followed by exposition of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is true both of confessions and catechisms. They begin by defining what a sacrament is before explaining the different senses in which both baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacramental. Despite their lucidity and precision, these statements also have their drawbacks. The generic account of a sacrament tended to emerge from eucharistic controversies about the nature of the real presence. The effect was somewhat Procrustean when baptism was presented as another species of the genus. Here, despite disclaimers, the effect of baptism was too tightly tied to the action of immersion or sprinkling in the threefold name. Thus the act of initiation became too easily detached from the context and subsequent activities which also mediated the divine grace and without which the language of baptism made little sense. In the case of the Lord's Supper, attention to and disputes over the sacramental nexus also contributed to a loss of the wider ethical significance of the sacrament, the 'as-so' connection which was described above. The regular reception of God's hospitality in the supper is closely linked in the New Testament to the hospitality that we are called to display towards others. Thus the link between eucharistic celebration and *diakonia* was arguably obscured in formal accounts of worship, but is robustly present in works such as Wolterstorff's *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*. This constriction of the sacraments may have been compounded by the tendency to infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, the arguments of Calvin and others notwithstanding. In the modern day Church of Scotland, though not perhaps in other traditions, we have a situation in which we can celebrate baptism too frequently and the Lord's Supper not often enough.

THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION OF WORSHIP

Any theology of worship which ignores the significance of the aesthetic is deficient. We worship God not as angels, far less as discarnate souls. Our worship is that of embodied, social persons for whom communication takes sensory forms. These include the visual, the verbal and the musical. In celebrating the beauty of creation, many of the Psalms pass effortlessly into celebration of the beauty of Israel's praise. This aesthetic requirement directs our attention to church music, the use of language in prayer and preaching, the layout of the church building, lighting and even PA systems. It is sometimes assumed that the Reformed tradition is hostile to

the intrusion of the aesthetic in worship, yet this is hardly true. It has its own distinctive aesthetic forms.

In the sixteenth century, the reform of church life involved in part an enhanced commitment to preaching, congregational participation, forms of language capable of universal comprehension, recitation of the Psalms and exclusion of all that diverted the attention of minister and people from the gospel represented in Word and sacrament. While this may have led to some iconoclastic excesses, it nonetheless represented a prioritising of key aesthetic forms as most appropriate to the communication of the evangelical faith and the glorifying of God. In a discussion of the role of singing in worship, Calvin writes of the power of music to move and inflame hearts. Conscious of its capacity to function in different ways, not all of which are virtuous, he insists upon the need for musical forms which display a weight and a majesty worthy of God. These qualities pertain to melodies that Calvin describes as moderate (*modérée*). Moreover, our singing should be of words reflecting sound doctrine so that there is a unity of the heart and the understanding. The Psalms are given to us for this purpose.

[A] linnet, a nightingale or a popinjay will sing well, but it will be without understanding. But man's proper gift is to sing, knowing what he says; after understanding must follow the heart and the affection, something that can only happen when we have the song imprinted on our memory never to cease singing it.¹⁶

Rather than eschewing aesthetic beauty, the traditions of the Reformed church reflect qualities embedded in its theological convictions. In characterising its worship, the poet and scholar Donald Davie has spoken of the simplicity, sobriety and measuredness of its style which provide a particular type of exquisiteness.¹⁷ This is exemplified *inter alia* in the

¹⁶ 'John Calvin, The Form of Prayers and Songs of the Church 1543: Letter to the Reader' translated by Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980), p. 164. For the original French text see *Opera Selecta*, vol. 2, pp. 12-18. I am grateful to John de la Haye for drawing my attention to this article.

¹⁷ Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church: The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700-1930* (London, 1978), p. 25. Nicholas Wolterstorff points out that loss of interest in these aesthetic dimensions of worship was connected to the exclusive position assigned the sermon in Protestant worship with the consequent overwhelming of the liturgy. *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, 1983), p. 159.

felicitous language of prayer and preaching, a commitment to intellectual precision in the service of the Word, the use of verse and musical forms, and the wearing of unostentatious vestments. Perhaps it had its limitations, particularly with respect to the visual arts. Yet at a time when worship is threatened by a loss of beauty and the incursion of forms which merely represent the personal preference of those leading it, we might do well to study more closely the aesthetic values of our tradition. These deserve not only historical respect but renewed appreciation for their contribution to the worship of God.