

Towards a Better Understanding of Church Liturgy/Worship Today¹

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The Ukrainian Theological Forum lists among its objectives – to demonstrate cooperation among theological institutions throughout the country. Overseas Council International was quite active, as an external catalyst, in the conception and realization of the first forum held in 2006 under the theme “Theology and Evangelism.” This forum was a good preparation for the Franklin Graham Festival held in Kiev six months later. During that first forum, the expression of worship became an issue of some concern, leading the planning committee for the second forum to decide – wisely – to make liturgy/worship the theme for this gathering. I was asked to prepare and present a basic paper on the “The Theological and Philosophical Understanding of Church Liturgy and Worship.” I did not expect this to be such a huge assignment, and I sought the advice of Dr. Ronald Man, the speaker on “Worship and Liturgy as Part of Curriculum Development in Theological Education” at the 2006 Overseas Council Institutes of Excellence around the world,

¹ Paper presented at the Theological Forum in Kiev, Ukraine November 2009. It was published in the Russian language as part of the Theological Forum proceedings and in *ICJ* 9:2 (2010): 69-77. This paper can be used for a retreat/workshop for the worship team of any church or for a group of individuals concerned about church music/liturgy/worship. The questions throughout the paper can be a basis for discussion.

as to where to begin. There have been literally hundreds of excellent books and articles written in the last few years. For the purpose of further study, I am listing some of the most helpful of these books and articles in the footnotes.² Also very helpful were the results of several congresses on liturgy and worship held recently, as well as the many declarations from seminars and international gatherings on the subject.³ It became quite clear to me that conflicting opinions on this topic are presently fueling a most heated debate, thereby dividing churches, denominations, theological schools, etc. It is time to call for a “cease-fire” to the worship wars.

In studying the subject of worship, one quickly discovers that the debates are not, in general, based on theological issues but rather on differing styles of worship or liturgy: for instance, contemporary choruses, often with endless repetition, versus simple, traditional hymns; organ music versus modern

² D.A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) and *Essay in Worship: Adoration and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford: University Press, 1993); Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans, 1629-1730* (New York: Peter Land, 1990); James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) and *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Mark Earey, “Worship – What do we think we are doing?” *Evangel* 16/1 (Spring 1998): 7-13; Don E. Saliers, *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996); David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992); Andrew E. Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise! Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Marianne Meye Thompson, “Worship in the Book of Revelation,” *Ex Auditu* 8 (1992): 45-54; I. Howard Marshall, “How far did the early Christians worship God?” *Churchman* 99 (1985): 216-29; John P. Richardson, “Is Worship Biblical?” *Churchman* 109 (1995): 197-218; Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) and *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Tim Ralston, “‘Remember’ and Worship: The Mandate and the Means,” *Reformation and Revival* 9/3 (2000): 77-89; Eugene H. Merrill, “Remembering: A Central Theme in Biblical Worship,” *JETS* 43 (2000): 27-36; Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. 231ff.; David Montgomery, *Sing a New Song: Choosing and Leading Praise in Today’s Church* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House and Hand-sel Press, 2000); Hotfon D. Eskrgirlf, *An Outline of Christian Worship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998); John Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997); Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); John E. Burkhart, *Worship: A Searching Examination of the Liturgical Experience* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982).

³ See www.worr.org, www.desiringgod.org, www.calvin.edu/worship, www.worship.ca/docs/lwf_ns.html

instruments, such as strings, drums, even entire bands; or simple congregational singing versus singing accompanied by the clapping of hands, rhythmic performances, or liturgical dancing.

Just a few weeks ago, as I was gathering material, I was introduced to a new song that addresses the mode of worship dilemma we face today and points out that the different types of worship all focus on the one and only eternal God. This song was presented for the first time at the annual conference of Peacemaker Ministries in Atlanta in September 2007.

Some Will Dance

See how the Father created both you and me
He made the universe—see God’s variety
We are His body, we worship in one accord
We serve the same God, we worship Christ the Lord
Some will dance, some will sing
Some will shout—still, the praises ring
Some people kneel, some will stand
Some will cry, and some will clap their hands

See how the Father created both you and me
Woman, man...both equal eternally
Let us speak peace and show the Master’s love
Let’s show His kingdom on earth as it is above
Some will dance, some will sing
Some will shout—still, the praises ring
Some people kneel, some will stand
Some will cry, and some will clap their hands

Some men are black, some are brown
Some men speak my way and some are from out of town
Still Jesus loves us and yearns that we all be saved
Who Jesus sets free is free and no more a slave
Some will dance, some will sing
Some will shout—still, the praises ring
Some people kneel, some will stand
Some will cry, and some will clap their hands⁴

Overseas Council has made this text available as a gift to all participants at this Forum in the form of a bookmark.

⁴ Music by Brad Clarkson, lyrics by Dawn Anthony.

When we ask, “What is worship?” and “What is liturgy?”, we must begin by developing a clear understanding of first, the basic principles or theological foundations and second, how these principles can be expressed (that is, practiced or demonstrated) in our various forms of worship and liturgy. The key question is how we as human beings can effectively combine principles and practice in worshipping a holy, eternal God. Let me now make several points to help us in our discussions and workshops on the subject.

I. *Imago Dei* – Man Created in God’s Image

The creation of man in God’s image remains a divine mystery. In order to approach the Creator, one must reflect in spirit and in truth this divine relationship (Jn. 4:24). Don Saliers, in his excellent little book *Worship Come to Its Senses*, characterizes relevant Christian worship as “renewed attention of awe, delight, truthfulness, and hope. These are called ‘senses’ because they name the patterns in human experience of God. These are also themes in praying, singing, and proclaiming good news in our gathering about the book, the font of baptism, and the Lord’s Table.”⁵

In our workshops on worship and liturgy, we would do well to explore these four senses of God, “awe, delight, truth, and hope,” as being foundational.

AWE: The Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer God described from Genesis to Revelation is beyond human comprehension and can only be understood as awesome. Man must offer himself as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Awe and gratitude are inseparable, leading to self-giving in worship as a response to the continuous creating and redeeming actions of God. He truly is awesome.

DELIGHT: The first question in the Westminster Catechism is, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” The praises of delight expressed especially in the psalms but also throughout the Old and New Testaments must become a part of life regardless of circumstances. “Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice,” says the Apostle Paul (Phil. 4:4). Glorification of God creates delight in the relationship with Him that overcomes even the most difficult moments of life and death.

TRUTH: In the presence of a holy and perfect God, we must perceive the truth that we are fallen creatures in need of redemption. In the presence of God, only truth and absolute honesty is permitted. Superficiality, half-heartedness, or light-heartedness must be replaced by truthful confession, forgiveness, and transformation. In our liturgy and worship, more emphasis should be put on what HE has done. Our testimonies have to reflect His actions (Ps 73:28c).

HOPE: In one of the tribal languages of Ghana, West Africa, the word hope is expressed as something you eat in order that it may become part of every living cell in your body. Hope, which contains the sense of both “al-

⁵ Don E. Saliers, *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 14.

ready” and “not yet,” must lead to a commitment to finish the race and receive the promised prize (Acts 20:24; 2 Tim. 4:7). Hope, in union with faith and love, must be the foundation of all our worship and liturgy.

Questions/Reflections for the workshops: How can we practise and express in our worship and our liturgy these four senses of God – awe, delight, truth, and hope?

II. The Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Worship comprises both revelation from the Divine and response from us humans, which is only possible with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Martin Luther wrote about worship simply as God speaking to us through His Word and we, in turn, responding to Him with prayer and songs of praise as part of the “living sacrifice” we offer to Him (Rom. 12:1). The Reformers returned to the Pauline theology of not replacing the priesthood (the mediating role between God and man) by merits or intercessions of the Church. Rather, each believer has the privilege and the obligation to approach God in worship. Jesus is described in Hebrews as the *Leitourgos* (Heb. 8:2), as the Mediator providing for each believer a direct approach to God. Paul, describing God’s grace and mercy in Romans, states clearly, “Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom. 12:1).

For James Torrance, worship as only our action is a Unitarian view, a human-centred theology. “We sit in the pew watching the minister ‘doing his thing,’ exhorting us ‘to do our thing,’ ” he says, “until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week! This kind of do-it-yourself-with-the-help-of-the-minister worship is what our forefathers would have called ‘legal worship’ and not ‘evangelical worship’.”⁶

In contrast, the Trinitarian view of worship is that we participate, through the Holy Spirit, in the incarnate Son’s communication with His Father. The incarnate form of worship is Trinitarian. The New Testament emphasis is on fellowship, sharing, communion, participation. “Because you are sons God sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, the Spirit who calls out ‘Abba, Father’ ” (Gal. 4:6). Worship and liturgy should be addressed to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Although there is only “One in being,” the three – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – should be worshipped equally in their distinctiveness.

Question/Reflection for the workshops: How can we change from human-centred theology to incarnate theology, worshipping the three-in-one beings of God equally?

⁶James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 20.

III. Required, not Optional

Worship is our celebrative response to what God has done, what He is still doing, and what He promises to do. “Worship is an act of service to God,” says John Burkhardt, “even though God does not really need what humans offer. For the Hebrews, God is God, whether served or not; and God deserves to be served, not for any reward to God’s servants but for God’s own worth. God does not require praise to be God; but as God, God demands it by right of being God.”⁷ We should not ask, “What can we give to God, Who has everything?” but rather, “What can we bring to God, Who gave everything?” We honor the Giver. Bringing sacrifices to, or performing rituals in honor of, the various gods of any religion or cult requires material offerings, offerings often associated with death, whereas God requires a living sacrifice, as described in Romans 12. God has provided the ultimate sacrifice – the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, one for all” (Heb. 10:10). “Therefore, let us continually offer to God the sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Heb. 13:15-16). Our worship and liturgy must include care for others – love and care for neighbors, within and outside God’s family. Evangelism – sharing the good news with unbelievers – is part of our worship (Rom. 15:16); we celebrate with the bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:8) as we share the good news. Our worship requires that we constantly refer to God’s activity, His design for a lost world, and engage with Him in building His kingdom. Sharing the Lord’s Table, inviting the outsider (Mt. 22:9), giving and not just receiving (Acts 20:35) should all be included in our liturgy of praise to the Triune God.

Question/Reflection for the workshops: How can we best express in our worship and liturgy the requirement that we be a living sacrifice for God, and for others, as part of building His kingdom?

IV. Holy God and Holy Man

Glorification of God and sanctification of humans belong together. The English term “worship” is best described with the unique German word *Gottesdienst* (God service), which expresses the double action of God serving man and man serving God. The two together define the fundamental character of Christian worship. Our praying, meditating, singing, reflecting, acting, and serving in *Gottesdienst* must provide the opportunity for the holy God to speak and bless as He responds, so that we become more like Him in who we are and in what we do. “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’ ” (1 Pet.

⁷ John E. Burkhardt, *Worship: A Searching Examination of the Liturgical Experience* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 16.

1:15-16). All our worship, including all liturgy, must be seen in terms of holiness. As the Church Father Irenaeus tells us, “The glory of God is a human fully alive. Nothing glorifies God more than a human being made holy; nothing is more likely to make a person holy than the desire to glorify God. Both the glorification of God and the sanctification of humans characterize Christian worship.”⁸

The victory God’s Son has achieved must be present in His Church. “What Christ has done in the past is again given to the worshipper to experience and appropriate in the present. It is a way of living with the Lord. The church presents what Christ has done for the worshipping congregation’s reenactment of these events. The worshipper can thus reexperience them for his or her own salvation.”⁹ Our generation seems to have forgotten that holiness – from God and towards God – requires time, practice, and adequate allowance for quietness and stillness. Action-oriented worshippers need to learn that God also speaks and blesses in silence: “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Ps. 46:10). Remember Elijah, who had a worship experience with God through silence (1 Ki. 19:12). Loudness, noise, or actions are not always required, nor are they necessarily the best form of worship. Proper, God-honoring celebration requires balance.

Questions/Reflections for the workshops: How can we assure that our worship is part of our sanctification, our becoming more holy – as God is holy? How do we incorporate silence into our worship?

V. Corporate and Individual Worship

The church as God’s temple, the gathering of believers worshipping corporately, demonstrates that the temple of God is bigger than the individual. “You are God’s temple, and God’s spirit lives in you . . . God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple” (1 Cor. 3:16-17). “Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25). “On the first day of the week we came together to worship and to break bread” (Acts 20:7). Numerous other passages speak of the corporate worship of the early Church.

Scripture makes clear, however, that the temple of God is also the body of the individual. “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God. You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

“In Ephesians 5:19 we speak ‘to one another’ when we sing; and in Colossians 3:16, the singing of ‘psalms, hymns and spiritual songs’ is in the

⁸ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 24.

⁹ White, 25.

context of teaching and admonishing one another – part of letting ‘the word of Christ dwell in you richly.’ This means that the purist model of addressing only God in our corporate worship is too restrictive.”¹⁰ Our singing, praying, meditating or glorifying God must have elements of shaping the individual – how to behave (to think, speak, and act) so that he or she becomes more and more like Christ. The song of the great leader Moses (Ex. 15:1-18), the prayer of the schizophrenic Jonah (Jon. 2:2-9), the song of the teenage girl Mary (Lk. 1:47-55) – each of these is a liturgical expression of individual adoration of God in submitting to Him.

Both pure joy and utter despair can be expressed in our worship – individually and corporately. Like children, we approach the Father with the assurance that He hears us and acts according to His divine plan. The book of Psalms provides endless examples of liturgy, songs, and prayers offered by individuals and in corporate gatherings. In today’s worship we should rediscover the richness and the depth of the Psalms, which combine glorification and sanctification for individuals and for the church family as a whole. The reading, even responsively, or the singing of entire passages of the Old Testament – especially the Psalms – was part of worship and liturgy for thousands of years and should again become a part of our worship today. A Latin American theologian once shared with me that every day he memorizes a hymn and a Bible passage or a Psalm as part of his daily walk with the Lord.

Question/Reflection for the workshops: How can we supplement corporate worship to help individuals to have daily worship experiences in their walk with the Lord?

VI. More Practical Recommendations

If what we sing is what we are, if our prayers and worship are a reflection of our character, if our liturgical acts are measurements of our relationship and communication with our holy God, then we should pay much more attention to what we do. Worship and liturgy must be more than just symbolic activities, habits, or traditions; they must recover and contain life itself. The gift of life requires adoration and action towards the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life.

Preparation and planning for liturgy/worship should be taken more seriously. To sing a song just to get people’s attention or to gather attendees to a conference, to repeat a chorus numerous times according to the mood of the leader, to offer spontaneous (and perhaps meaningless) prayers as is our custom is at best very superficial. Corporate worship and liturgy requires preparation, reflection, and practice. Prayer – listening and talking to the Almighty God – should not be mere ritual. “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans” (Mt. 6:7). The well-known Hollis Professor, George

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, “Worship under the Word,” in D.A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 45.

Huntston Williams, my Doctor Father, refused to pray publicly without a day's notice so that he could prepare properly. The lyrics of our songs and choruses should be checked in detail to be sure they complement the rest of the service and are theologically sound. Every song and instrument that enriches our worship should be the best we can offer to God. We have to learn and practise worship, which includes much more than just the adjustment of the loud speakers or the outward appearance of the worship team. Worship requires wisdom and experience and should not be assigned only to the youth. Emotional expression should be balanced by reflection, inner hearing, and silent praise. Worship has to be authentic, godly, and biblical.

Questions/Reflections for the workshops: How can we include more practice, wisdom, and experience in our worship preparation? Who will evaluate what is the best for the Master?

VII. Conclusion – Worship Should Be Taught in Our Theological Institutions

In surveying all the recent material on worship and liturgy and in preparing this paper, it has become more and more clear to me that the topic of worship and liturgy must be taught in our theological seminaries and Bible institutes. At least one course for every student on “The Fullness of Worship” should be a requirement in every theological training institution. Biblical variations in worship, personal expression, and corporate adoration and action, as well as proper preparation with outcome evaluation, should be included in the course. A course on prayer is essential; Jesus taught His disciples to pray. The subject of liturgical expression should be part of the training program for every pastor. Christian leaders have to learn to select, prepare, guide, and evaluate worship teams and their leaders. Every age group should be included in worship.

The recent tension in our churches with regard to worship can be minimized if church leaders, pastors, and evangelists are properly prepared in the art of worship and liturgy. This subject has been ignored for too long. It is time that we give it the attention it deserves. As the seminary goes, so goes the church.

Questions/Reflections for the workshops: How can we include a required course in worship and leadership in our theological schools? What should be included? Who should teach it?

In closing, let me say with the psalmist,

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. (Ps. 95:6-8)

Let me recommend that in the remaining time allocated we split up into seven groups and discuss the questions raised.

Materials for break-out sessions/workshops

Time permitting, I would like the entire gathering to split up into seven groups (just where they sit), and each group should address the questions following each of the seven sections.

- 1) How can we practise and express in our worship and our liturgy these four senses of God – awe, delight, truth, and hope?
- 2) How can we change from human-centred theology to incarnate theology, worshipping the three-in-one beings of God equally?
- 3) How can we best express in our worship and liturgy the requirement that we be a living sacrifice for God, and for others, as part of building His kingdom?
- 4) How can we assure that our worship is part of our sanctification, our becoming more holy – as God is holy? How do we incorporate silence into our worship?
- 5) How can we supplement corporate worship to help individuals to have daily worship experiences in their walk with the Lord?
- 6) How can we include more practice, wisdom, and experience in our worship preparation? Who will evaluate what is the best for the Master?
- 7) How can we include a required course in worship and leadership in our theological schools? What should be included? Who should teach it?