

## LITURGICAL ISSUES AND DIRECTIONS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

### Two: Liturgical Issues and Directions Today (concluded)

#### UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS

**The Problem of Culture or Christ.** Presbyterians have insisted that prayers and sermons be spontaneous, well prepared, informal, written out, free, intelligent, emotional, beautiful, simple, read, not read, long, and short. The frequency of communion has varied from weekly, to quarterly, to participation at sacramental seasons, to rejection of sacramental seasons, to monthly, and back toward weekly observance. Sermon frequency has changed from fifteen opportunities each week in Calvin's Geneva, including morning and evening prayer, to twice on Sunday and once at Wednesday-night prayer meetings, to once on Sunday morning and perhaps at an occasional fellowship dinner, to attendance at Christmas or Easter. Sermon length has varied from two hours, to one hour, to forty-five minutes, to thirty minutes, to twenty minutes, and now the push is for no more than fifteen. We have moved from an era when the strange world of the Bible was virtually unknown, to an era when virtually every home had and read its own Bible, to an era when virtually every home has, but seldom reads, the scriptures.

Presbyterians have rejected organs, guitars, psalms, new hymns, old hymns, gospel hymns, folk hymns, jazz hymns, modern hymns, choirs, and embraced them all. They have rejected the Catholic church year, Calvin's church year, the celebration of Christmas or Easter, the unison praying of the Lord's Prayer or the creed, and embraced them all, along with Boy Scout Sunday, Mother's Day, announcements, and mimeograph machines. They have stood, sat, knelt, and nodded for prayer. They have worshipped in homes, in white frame, bare, one-room churches, in full monumental Gothic splendor complete with pompeian red paint, stained glass windows, kitchens and crockery, and in churches in the round. They have rejected pledging, rented their pews, used the envelope system, raised money with fairs and bazaars, encouraged tithing, collected loose change in beaver hats, cloth bags, wooden dishes, and felt-lined metal platters, and made the every member canvass an annual event. They have drunk gallons of both fermented wine and unfermented grape juice at communion. They have been fundamentalists and modernists, conservatives and radicals, sectarian and

ecumenical. They have come to church as a haven from the world and have been burned at the stake with the psalms pouring forth from their lips. They have fought over all of these things, usually basing their arguments on an appeal to tradition or tradition under the guise of scripture.

Often the differences have been, and are, petty. Often real and important cultural and social differences — rural-city, black-white, conservative-liberal — were, and are, at stake. Occasionally the integrity of the gospel itself has been, and is, in question, and they have sought consciously and courageously to understand what it is that God would have them do. Presbyterians have a full and rich heritage of worship, filled with much for which they can be proud, and filled with many mistakes from which we should seek to learn. Many of these different approaches to worship remain with us now. Movement and change have not necessarily implied growth or progress. The tenacious hold on tradition and traditional scriptural interpretation has not necessarily resulted in Christian discipleship or evangelical integrity. Neither fundamentalist revivals nor sophisticated or experimental worship services have necessarily resulted in reformed personal and corporate life. The gap between *The Worshipbook* and the local parish is large and calls for a concerted, sensitive, and challenging pastoral response as we seek to answer in a particular community the complex question, culture or Christ?

It is obvious that American Presbyterian worship has accommodated itself to culture. Cultural accommodation in one form or another is inevitable. The real question, then and now, is will we seek *consciously* to adapt our language of prayer and praise, with theological and scriptural integrity, to the ever-changing needs and aspirations of people as we seek together to hear and to answer God's call *to us* in a particular time and place? Or will we simply allow our faith to be compromised while under the guise of fidelity to changeless tradition we in fact remain blind to the reality of our own accommodation to cultural values and deaf to our own refusal to hear the call of Christ's gospel for us today?

**The Problem of Language.** There are several key areas in which this larger question becomes focused. First of all, there is the continuing problem of the language we choose to use in our worship. Just as medieval Catholicism made a sacred idol out of the traditional language and forms of the Latin Mass long after these had lost their power for effective communication, so Reformed Christians eventually made sacred idols out of the

language and forms of Calvin or Westminster, insisting that the church's music must be limited to psalm-singing and its language to King James English. Fortunately other Reformed Christians have instead remained more faithful to Calvin's original insight and intent that the language of the church's worship must be *continually* translated, *ever* reforming, *always* changing and evolving to fit the needs and language of each new generation. But the tension between these two competing approaches to language remains.

While new hymns, new music, and contemporary scriptural translations and prayers have found their way into almost every modern day congregation, each congregation still has its unspoken limits for worship reform, its own personal taste and style. And while in some congregations this local taste and style grow out of a conscious effort to worship in a language and form that is most appropriate and meaningful to those particular people in that particular situation, in other congregations this local taste and style instead reflect an unconscious idolatry of the old, the traditional, the familiar, and the comfortable.

Further while most modern Reformed liturgies have succeeded in modernising obsolete language forms (such as substituting "you" for "thee" and "thou"), the much deeper problem of language *images* and changing needs and meanings still remains. How can we speak meaningfully of God as "Father" to a child whose father continually abuses him? How can we speak meaningfully of God as "He" to a woman who desperately needs to understand God in terms of her female life and experience? How can we speak meaningfully of God as "King" to a people who have known only torture and oppression under the rule of their earthly kings? When the thoughts and feelings conveyed by a certain human image change and evolve in human culture, should not the church be willing to change those images, or even use new images, to better and more faithfully describe the more central "character" of the God we know in Jesus Christ? These are questions with which the church will have to continue to struggle as each local congregation and the church as a whole seeks to find a faithful and meaningful language of prayer and praise.

**The Problem of Music and the Arts.** Closely related to the problem of language is the continuing problem of music and the arts in the life of the church. Just as there exists a tendency to idolise the forms and language of worship, so there is a tendency to idolise and limit the church's art and music. One church doesn't like music which is too classical, operatic, or snobbish.

Another church doesn't like music which is too gospel, sentimental, or common. One church sings only those "old favorites" or "great hymns" which have stood "the test of time". Another sings popular tunes and folk hymns in a conscious attempt to communicate more effectively to a modern world. One church welcomes organs and robed choirs, but rejects guitars and singers in jeans. Another welcomes violins, flutes, and chamber music, but rejects drums, saxaphones, and jazz. One church allows stained glass, weaving, and banners, but rejects slides, film, drama, or dance.

Often this too is as it should be, for as we have seen music and the arts, as all other aspects of the church's worship, must be in the language of the particular people who are worshipping in order to give meaningful expression to their faith. A black congregation in Harlem, a mountain congregation in Appalachia, a college educated well-to-do congregation in urban or surburban Washington, a rural congregation in India, all have their own preferences and tastes as to musical and artistic style. But as often as not our local musical and artistic styles instead also reflect our unconscious idolatry of the old and the familiar, even when these words, music, and art forms have long since lost any real meaning or relevance for our lives. While there is plenty of room for such local musical and artistic styles in American Presbyterianism, the church must take care that these styles not be solely dictated by our already existing cultural values. Openness to an ever-growing diversity and richness of musical and artistic expression is a necessity if we are to speak effectively to the worship needs of people of different ages and cultures and from various national, educational, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, and if we are to learn from each other and so grow together as the one body of Christ.

Another important continuing issue concerning the church's music and art is that of performance versus participation. As we have seen, because of his concern that the meaning and clarity of the church's prayers and songs of praise had been sacrificed to the idols of artistry, beauty, perfection, and tradition as understood by the priestly elite, Calvin did away with instrumental music in the church's worship, substituted translated biblical texts for obscure Latin lyrics, and replaced intricate musical scores and trained priestly choirs with simple melodies the entire congregation could sing. Since Calvin instruments, choirs, and involved anthems have once again all found their way back into American Presbyterian worship. Do these serve to encourage or to discourage congregational

participation and understanding in worship? To what extent does the concern for artistic quality and a professional performance override the role of music and the arts as an aid to the *congregation* giving voice to its own prayers and praises? Perhaps Calvin and other early Reformers over-reacted and went too far in abandoning instruments, choirs, and other artistic forms altogether. But should the church's music and art today be more like that of the "professional" artist, or more like the folk arts and crafts of the people?

Lastly, given the desperate needs in our world today, how much of its money and resources should the church spend in its efforts to express its faith through music and the arts? How "Christian" is it for a church to spend one hundred thousand dollars on a new pipe organ, or five hundred thousand dollars on a sanctuary when the amount of the church's resources going to mission is declining every year? On the other hand must the church then abandon its own artistic expression and patronage of the arts completely? Cannot the arts, in certain circumstances, be a bearer of Christ's love and hope even to the poor and desperate? But where is the balance? And how do we set our priorities in a way which is faithful to Christ?

**The Problem of Professionalism and Lay Participation.** We have already touched on the issue of performance versus participation in the church's music and arts. But this issue is but a part of another much larger problem, the problem of professionalism and lay participation in worship. At its best the Reformed stress has always been on the need to give worship back to the people in a language and form which encourages their active participation and understanding. Worship in spirit and in truth can never be conceived as a spectator sport which the laity watch from the comfort and safety of padded pews, but must be understood as an activity in which all the laity are in fact themselves the key participants and on whom the outcome, with the help and grace of God, depends.

And yet, for various reasons, both lay people and church professionals have continued to resist this stress. In spite of some attempts to encourage more lay participation and less clerical and professional domination, most music and worship training conferences among present-day American Presbyterians if anything focus even more on "quality" and "professionalism", not less.

Have we Protestants, and especially we Presbyterians, with our stress on a qualified ministry ended up by creating a monster? Have we made preaching and worship leadership generally as

magical, superstitious, and authoritarian in the eyes and ears and minds and hearts of our people as the priests made the Mass prior to the Reformation? Have we ended up by making the quality and professionalism of our qualified ministry into an idol which in reality works against the nurturing and development of real lay participation in worship in any more than a token sense? Have we created a professional elite, a priestly caste which in the last analysis undermines the priesthood of all believers we originally sought to encourage?

How can we have quality in our worship without sacrificing spontaneity, discouraging the people's less than perfect participation, and creating a professional priestly cult? How can we have a healthy informality in our worship which includes the active participation of all the ages and stages of a varied Christian community, without becoming too chaotic and disorderly, or degenerating into worship which is less than faithful to the best standards of scripture and tradition?

Certainly we need a qualified and superbly trained ministry. We can, and must, continue to demand excellence from our ministers and church musicians in the area of their worship leadership as in other areas. But should they be trained to perform as pulpit princes and master recitalists? Or should they instead be trained to be sensitive interpreters of both the scriptures and the culture of the particular people they are called to serve, interpreters and teachers who can then enable those people *themselves* to worship God in spirit and in truth? Do we want professional worship leaders who put on a professional performance? Or do we want leaders who are qualified and trained to lead *us* into worshipping God *together* as a priesthood of all believers?

#### PRESENT TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we continue to face these and other unresolved problems three major trends for worship renewal are currently at work among American Presbyterians.

**The Liturgical Trend in Worship.** First of all, as we have seen, there is a liturgical trend in Presbyterian worship today. This trend is perhaps best exemplified by *The Worshipbook* itself, P.A.M. (the Presbyterian Association of Musicians), the denominational worship and music conferences, and the journal *Reformed Liturgy and Music*. This trend stresses a renewed appreciation of the historical roots of Reformed worship, especially in the early church and in the Reformation era itself. It stresses a full return both to Calvin's approach to the liturgy

of worship, and to his understanding of the unity of word and sacrament. It makes a conscious attempt with Calvin to give the language of worship and prayer back to the people to whom it really belongs. It does not attempt to idolise past forms or resort to historical nostalgia nearly so much as it seeks to recapture a theologically responsible approach and to adapt that approach to the needs of the present.

Although this trend is heavily concerned with *Reformed* models for worship, it is at the same time heavily ecumenical, as is indicated by its approach to the lectionary, the church year, and dialogue with other liturgical traditions as diverse as Lutheranism, Anglicanism, Methodism, and Catholicism. It is concerned not only to heal the old wounds of the past, but to build for the future based on the best insights of our past heritage. It is in many ways an open and very diverse trend, thoroughly modern and yet thoroughly Reformed. It is open to non-ethnic and non-sexist revisions in the language of liturgy. It is aware as well of the special worship needs of certain other groups such as youth.

Yet as we have seen in actual practice this liturgical trend in worship tends to be upper-middle class in origin, language, and style. And for all of its concern to encourage lay involvement and participation in the liturgy, it seems to foster a climate of "professionalism" in the church's worship and music which ultimately can work against in depth lay involvement. For all its openness it can at times be very narrow, very formal, very intellectual, very word-centered, very elitist, and very "old school" in its focus and ultimate allegiance. For all its attempts to leave room for local freedom and variation it tends to be "big church" in orientation, scope, and direction (although far more than half of our churches are "small church" in size and outlook).

**The Participatory Trend in Worship.** A second trend is what we might call the participatory trend in Presbyterian worship. This trend is perhaps best exemplified by the multi-media worship education kit *Takestock: Worship* by Don M. Wardlaw (John Knox Press, 1976). In most respects this trend agrees with the historical stress of the liturgical trend. But in addition it puts its primary focus on a renewed understanding of the priesthood of all believers in the church's life and worship. It stresses lay participation and involvement in worship not only in singing, leading prayers, and reading scriptures, but also in the actual planning of worship. While stressing an expertly trained and qualified ministry, it downplays the "professional" role of

“the expert” and plays up the role of the minister as one who works together with lay people to enable them all to worship God in the way, the language, and the style that is most meaningful for them.

Where the liturgical trend tends to propose its answers to the questions of worship in the form of a denominational worship book, the participatory trend is very much a “grass-roots” approach to planning worship that is responsible and faithful on the local level, whatever the size or cultural background of the local church. In addition it makes a more concerted effort to encourage non-verbal as well as verbal worship forms. And in its willingness to innovate in this and other areas it is more similar to the “new school” than the “old”. Yet in its theology and content it is both thoroughly Reformed and thoroughly contemporary. It tends to be less formal, less head-centered, and more concerned for cultivating a sense of worship which grows out of shared common experience. Where the liturgical trend tends to have worship take place in a formal “living room” setting, the participatory trend encourages a more relaxed setting more like that of the family den.

The chief criticisms made against this approach are that it is unrealistic in its expectations of lay interest and involvement in worship planning and leadership; that it sacrifices quality for this increased lay involvement; and that all in all it is too informal and experience-centered in its quest for lay participation.

**The Mission Trend in Worship.** The third trend is what we might call the mission trend in Presbyterian worship. This trend has appeared in a number of forms in a variety of worship traditions in recent years. For our purposes here it is perhaps most conveniently summarised by the approach outlined in the section entitled “Worship in Mission” in the *Report of the 1978 Mission Consultation of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*. Essentially this approach affirms that worship in spirit and in truth can never take place apart from awareness of and involvement in the mission and ministry of the church of Jesus Christ.

It too affirms the historical approach of the liturgical trend. And it affirms the understanding of the priesthood of all believers in the participatory trend. But it stresses that people can know their history, understand their liturgy, and participate in groups which lead and even plan worship and still miss the most important elements of Christian worship. Unless the people of God are vitally involved in the mission and ministry to which

they are called in Christ they will have nothing worth praying and worshipping about. They may attempt to worship on the basis of their shared group experience, but unless that shared experience includes and is rooted in a sense of discipleship and mission it will be shallow and hollow. As a result worship will be shallow and hollow. Involvement in mission leads Christians to worship. And true worship always leads Christians inevitably to involvement in mission. The one cannot exist without the other.

The mission trend consciously and purposefully extends this concern to all aspects of the church's life and worship. For example, as the consultation report indicates, while affirming "the role of the arts in worship" the mission trend urges the church also "to demonstrate a simplified lifestyle through worship experiences and facilities". It has a world-view and a world-wide approach to worship, recognising that for all its rich diversity and variety in the Western nations, an even richer variety of worship forms and styles is encountered when we extend our vision to include all our sisters and brothers in the Christian church throughout the world. It affirms that we have much to learn, as well as much to share, from the "other traditions of the people of God, especially from the Third World".<sup>1</sup>

Both the liturgical trend and the participatory trend are aware of the need to connect worship and mission. But neither is quite as explicit about this need as the mission trend itself. The mission trend in worship does not so much debate or criticise the other two approaches as it challenges and amplifies them both in its more central focus on the role and place of mission in worship. The mission trend continually reminds us all of Calvin's insight of how easy it is to allow our concern for the externals of worship to become an evasion by which we hope to escape giving ourselves to God.

**The Ongoing Debate.** At times it seems that the liturgical trend and the participatory trend are locked into a struggle that is neither healthy nor productive. The liturgical forces especially seem reluctant to compromise or give up any control of their hard-won reigns of power. The Joint Office of Worship itself has in recent years been caught up in this struggle. This need not be the case.

The debate needs to go on, but in a healthy and productive way. There are very real and even crucial differences in the liturgical and participatory approaches as we have seen, but they also share much in common. Neither side has all the answers any more than did the "old school" or the "new school" in a

time now past. But both sides have approaches, resources, and ideas well worth sharing. Each can learn from the other. Each can greatly enrich the other. There are some hopeful signs that this has already begun to happen and will increase and continue in the future. Then both sides can move on to the more urgent business of dealing more effectively with the question of the relationship between the church's worship and its mission, the relationship between reformed worship and reformed life.

American Presbyterians also need to move ahead to explore the related liturgical issues being raised in fresh ways by people such as John Westerhoff, an American Episcopalian currently teaching at a Methodist seminary, in his recent book *Learning Through Liturgy*. How can we find a more faithful balance between intellect and emotion, right doctrine and right living, evangelism and nurture, spiritually and social action, tradition and change, facts and intuition in our Reformed worship? How can we truly begin to *effectively* integrate education, worship, fellowship, and service into a single experiential whole? Whether liturgical or anti-liturgical, what are our *real* rituals and what do they say about who we are as the people of God? How can these rituals be altered so as to lead to a more faithful discipleship?

These are but a few among the many questions American Presbyterians, and the church as a whole, will continue to face as they continue to struggle to reform the life and worship of the people of God.

#### NOTES

1. P.C.U.S., *One Mission Under God, Report of the 1978 Mission Consultation of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*. Office of the Stated Clerk, Atlanta, 1978, p. 24.

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