Theology of Worship seminar

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**‘Where do we come in?’**

The effect of worship on the congregation

## 1 Introduction

The starting point for this paper was a throwaway remark by an elder during a bible study discussion. She was putting forward the case for a midweek fellowship meeting, ‘Because,’ she explained, ‘on a Sunday morning, we come in and we are busy-busy with all our duties, then we sit down and listen to the service, and sometimes we learn something, and then we have a cup of tea and go home’.

We laughed at the bluntness, but there was truth in what she said.

If this really represents the congregation’s experience of worship, no wonder our churches are emptying, and no wonder we are reluctant to invite new people in. Pastoral theology gives us tools to understand what is going on when we gather for worship: what messages are being given, intentionally or otherwise, and how people are shaped, individually and collectively, through the experience.

I will offer a brief overview of the purpose and origins of Christian worship, then look at some particular aspects - use of space, use of language, and participation – that may help or hinder us in fulfilling the purpose. This is a starting point for discussion, not an in-depth study, and there are no final conclusions, simply thoughts so far.

I am looking at regular weekly gatherings, rather than special services such as rites of passage. My own experience is mostly in traditional settings and this is reflected here.

## 2 Background: What are we aiming for?

### 2.1 Purpose of Worship

The primary purpose of worship is to give praise and glory to God. We gather together on the Lord’s day, as a community of believers, to proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, through the incarnation, God has chosen to link divine worship with the deepest human need, and ‘God’s command to us to worship him is a concession to our needs’[[2]](#footnote-2). It is valid therefore to consider what those needs might be, and how they might be met, or not, in worship.

The Biblical picture of the church is as the Body of Christ, with Christ as the Head, so worship is about building up that Body in community[[3]](#footnote-3). This comes as no surprise, since God has always been about relationship and community. God called Abraham to be the father of a great nation and established a covenant with his descendants (Gen 17:1-8). The Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law are guidelines for how to live as a community under God. Jesus calls people into the kingdom and creates a new covenant, a new community (Luke 22:14-20).

Social activities may help to foster fellowship, but Ramshaw argues that ritual, the worship we share, is our place to meet and to enact our core identity[[4]](#footnote-4). Marva J. Dawn suggests that worship has not just to enact our core identity but to build it, nurturing Christian character both in individuals and in the congregation as a whole[[5]](#footnote-5), which in turn is about equipping Christians for their everyday lives.

For the congregation, then, worship is about building us up, shaping us into the kind of people God calls us to be.

### 2.2 Origins of Christian worship

The first followers of Jesus were Jewish, and the earliest Christian liturgy grew out of Jewish worship. Jewish worship was located in three places: the Temple, the local synagogue, and the home. Temple worship was mainly centred on sacrifice, offered by the priests on behalf of the people. As the dwelling place of God, it was also seen as a place of public prayer. Synagogue services were non-sacrificial and centred around the reading and exposition of Scripture. For those living far from the Temple, and for all Jewish people after the Temple’s destruction, the synagogue became the main focus for all public worship. The home was the place for family worship, for establishing the daily practice of faith, the blessing of meals and passing on bible stories, as well as for individual prayer[[6]](#footnote-6).

This pattern of worship works when most of the community, and all members of a family, are of the same faith, as was the case in Judaism. The early Christians had a different situation: they were a small minority, and although some households were converted en bloc[[7]](#footnote-7), faith was normally an individual response which might be at odds with the rest of the family[[8]](#footnote-8). Christian worship had not simply to replace the synagogue worship based around the word of God, but also the family meals and fellowship (Acts 2:46). This became even more significant when Christianity spread to Gentile territory. In Corinth, for example, the communion services included a shared meal as well as the breaking of bread (1 Cor 11:17-34).

Centuries later, under Christendom in Western Europe, the situation was reversed: most of the community and all members of a family would be Christian. Some aspects of fellowship, such as meal blessings and prayers, devolved to the home. Church worship no longer needed to support a faith community within the wider community; there was no real distinction between the two.

The 20th Century, however, saw the end of Christendom[[9]](#footnote-9), at least within the UK. Church attendance has sharply declined, children no longer automatically follow their parents’ faith, and a Christian may once again be the only one in the family. We are much closer now to the situation of the early church, of being a minority within community and family. There is arguably, therefore, once again a need for the church to focus on building up fellowship as a church family.

The image of replacing family worship is helpful because it counters the criticism sometimes levelled at churches of being simply ‘social clubs’. A social club implies a self-selected group; a church fellowship, like a family, is God-given and will include people we might otherwise not meet or want to know. Dawn warns of the fallacy that being a community means feeling cosy and warm towards one another, which can be exclusive; worship is for God, and we develop community best, and make strangers feel at home, by keeping our worship public and objective[[10]](#footnote-10).

## 3 Considerations: What are we actually doing?

If we summarise our aim as the building of fellowship and Christian community through worship, we can then see how our worship practices might help or hinder this aim.

## 3.1 Space and layout

Before the Reformation, the central feature of public worship was the Mass. The priest, with his back to the congregation, would offer Mass on behalf of the people. It followed that the focal point of a church interior was the altar, positioned at the East end of the building and often ornately decorated or canopied. Often the altar was separated from the people by a rail, or in some traditions even a complete screen to preserve the holy mystery. The people participated by gazing on the presence of God as represented in the eucharist, and by responding to that through physical gesture in the form of kneeling, standing, sitting, genuflecting and making the sign of the cross.

After the Reformation, the priestly tradition churches continued to focus on the altar, though with the priest moving to the side of the altar or, more usually now, behind it facing the congregation. Many also continued the physical gestures. The Reformed churches, by contrast, had no altar and no priests: the communion table is just a table, the bread and wine remain bread and wine even after blessing, the word of God preached and read has equal weight with the sacraments, and the minister or lay leader facilitates the worship for all rather than offering it on their behalf. Early nonconformist chapels and meeting rooms may have reflected this theology but many 19th and 20th century Reformed churches have tended to revert to more traditional church design[[11]](#footnote-11).

There may be no chancel, but there is often a platform, raised by one or two steps. The communion table is placed centrally at the front looking remarkably like an altar. The pulpit and lectern stand at either side of the platform like twin sentry posts. The effect is to create a visible division between the raised area and the rest, and the whole makes a strong visual statement: this is where the special stuff happens, this is where the special people perform. Worse still, the Reformed congregation are not gazing on the presence of God; they have minimal participation in physical gesture, reduced to standing or sitting; and they are thus reduced to being spectators of whatever the people at the front are doing[[12]](#footnote-12).

## 3.2 Language and Liturgy

Christian and Jewish worship is a response to the word of God: the word that brought the world into being, that is heard in the covenant and proclaimed in the Law and by the prophets and, for Christians, the word that is made flesh in Jesus. It is no surprise, therefore, that our worship is framed in words[[13]](#footnote-13), though these words are supported by sacraments and other actions which engage the body and soul as well as the mind[[14]](#footnote-14).

The words we use in worship therefore carry great significance. As D H Tripp writes, “Liturgists have a debt to the other theological disciplines, and a far greater one to the Church at large and to its pastoral service.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Tripp points out the importance of worship in enabling theology - unless God is worth worshipping, God-language is too dangerous to retain – and in forming the scriptural canon – much of the Bible was written to be read out in the synagogue or to the early churches. Worship is also the only corporate activity in which Christians profess, verbally or otherwise, what they believe.[[16]](#footnote-16)

It matters, then, that we choose our language with care, whether in creating set liturgies or in writing our own. For example, some people are troubled about calling God ‘Father’, or by the phrase in the Creed ‘and was made man’, finding that this emphasises the maleness of Jesus rather than his humanity[[17]](#footnote-17). A woman constantly belittled by her husband struggled with prayers of confession that dwelt on ‘miserable sinners’.

It also matters that our words are not at odds with our practice. It is too easy to speak of inclusion while not inviting children to share in communion; or to preach a gospel of grace while insisting on moral stipulations around initiation and marriage that look like works-righteousness.[[18]](#footnote-18) Worse still is dishonesty: where ritual statements are at variance with real life, such as words about free choice in the baptism of a teenager coerced by parents; when worship leaders assume or impute feelings to the congregation; or in manipulating people to make ritual statements they do not support, such as suddenly calling on married couples to renew their vows[[19]](#footnote-19). However, it is sometimes possible to shape feelings and response by using particular words and actions, for example giving thanks to help foster a sense of gratitude. [[20]](#footnote-20)

In a more positive way, a congregation could choose a prayer, or create a whole liturgy, which was meaningful to them and helped encourage their sense of identity[[21]](#footnote-21).

Much has been said about the accessibility of language, and whether we should always use modern English. Ramshaw suggests that formalised phrases can be meaningful even if not in everyday language, such as the exchange ‘The Lord be with you/and also with you’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Perhaps the key is education: we assume that people will just pick up on liturgy as they go along, but if they don’t, they may end up following patterns that never quite make sense. Tripp recommends education in liturgy for both clergy and laity, so that all may understand what is going on, and so that we may build good practice; ritual is too important to be safely left to instinct or habit.[[23]](#footnote-23)

## Participation

There are many ways in which members of a congregation can participate in worship. We might group these under three broad headings: participation in leading worship, open participation, and personal participation.

Most aspects of worship leading can be taken on by anyone with the appropriate gifts and the trust of the congregation. Typically this might include reading the bible, leading prayers, playing music or singing, preaching the sermon or giving a talk. In the URC a lay person may also be authorised to preside at the sacraments. Some churches may have other particular skills to offer such as a drama team or a person who can prepare visual presentations. The role of the minister or main worship leader is not to do everything but to midwife the talents of others.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Participation in leading usually needs to be planned and prepared in advance. Regular items such as prayers and readings may be organised on a rota basis. One-off events require more coordination and it can be difficult to give enough notice to allow for rehearsal. This becomes even less easy in a church where most services are led by visiting preachers who may not know the congregation’s gifts.

‘Open participation’ covers those areas where people are asked to answer questions aloud, share with the person sitting near them, or take part in a group discussion. The responses are individual and are not usually planned or rehearsed. Not everyone is comfortable with this kind of interaction, especially if they are asked to share personal information; some of this discomfort, however, may stem from unfamiliarity. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it gets easier the more often it happens, especially if there is a regular slot for sharing.

This open participation is a good way for members of the congregation to hear each other’s stories and share their concerns, and can be particularly helpful in making people feel valued.

‘Personal participation’ covers joining in with the set parts of the liturgy, including hymns and songs, prayers and responses, where the words are decided by others. It would also include the gestures and postures mentioned earlier, if these take place. It is personal in the sense that it is possible to do these things without interacting with the other people around, which may mean that it is less likely to be helpful in building fellowship, even if the individual is deeply engaged and consciously meaning every word and gesture. There are also potential problems of exclusion, if people are unfamiliar with a tune, say, or cannot read the words.

However, personal participation can form community through the use of shared symbols and action focused around those symbols, which gives ‘both the appearance and the experience of acting as one’[[25]](#footnote-25). An example is the offertory collection seen in a Ghanaian fellowship[[26]](#footnote-26). Accompanied by singers and drums, the congregation dance gently to the front of the church to place their offerings in the bowls and then dance back to their places. Each person dances individually but shares in the moving around, the music and the spirit of gladness.

## 4 Summary of thoughts so far

The place of church worship in Christian life means that it carries considerable power. Liturgy calls for ‘continuing sociological, psychological, moral, philosophical and theological critique, without which it is intolerable’.[[27]](#footnote-27) This paper is a beginning, not a conclusive study.

Building up fellowship is undermined by the separation of the space into ‘doing’ and ‘spectating’ areas. We may not be in a position to make major structural alterations, but anything which helps break down that separation is likely to support the sense of community. This might include:

* Having people cross the divide, whether that means the worship leader moving into the congregation or members of the congregation appearing on the platform. Wembley Park URC has just added a small handrail to assist people getting up the two steps.
* Using the platform area for activities other than worship (eg using the communion table as a craft table)
* Encouraging the open participation, giving more people the chance to speak their own thoughts, whether to a neighbour or to the whole church

Building fellowship can be undermined by the worship leader choosing all the words. This might be overcome by:

* Inviting the congregation to choose the hymns (perhaps in a ‘Songs of Praise’ style service)
* Encouraging people to take part in leading parts of the service, especially prayers
* Asking for prayer requests as part of open participation
* Facilitating the congregation to write a prayer, or statement of mission, together that can be used in other services

Finally, based on the Ghanaian experience, it is easier to create a sense of fellowship if people are enjoying themselves.

Bibliography

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1. Ramshaw, p15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ramshaw p16, quoting Victor White [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dawn, p130 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ramshaw, p30 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dawn, p9 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jones, p70-72 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For example, the household of Cornelius, Acts 11:14, or the jailer in Acts 16:31-33 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matt 10:34-36 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dawn, p9 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dawn, p140-141 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It would be interesting to see if there is correlation between building style and the place of nonconformists in public life. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Dawn, p155 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jones, p11 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jones, p12 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. D H Tripp, in Jones, p565 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, p565-566 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. McEwan, p13 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jones, p567 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ramshaw, p26-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ramshaw, p28 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. McEwan, p3 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ramshaw, p34 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jones, p567Th [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ramshaw, p22 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ramshaw, p29 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. London Ga-Dangme Fellowship, meeting at St Andrew’s URC Ealing. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jones p567 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)