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## Contemporary Church, Reformed Theology, and the Practice of Public Worship

John D. Witvliet

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*Editor's Note: This essay of John D. Witvliet is based on a lecture delivered at the Dordt College pastors conference held in April, 1996.*

## The Contemporary Church, Reformed Theology, and the Practice of Public Worship

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by John D. Witvliet

**G**athering together each week for Christian worship is one of the greatest privileges we share as Christians. Each week, we have the opportunity to experience the community formed as the body of Christ. Each week, we have the privilege to acclaim God's goodness by lustily singing powerful tunes that express profound texts of praise and prayer. Each week, we are able to hear and be confronted by the proclamation of God's very Word. And each week, or, alas, at least quite frequently, we participate in nothing less than union with Christ our Lord through the Spirit

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*John D. Witvliet is a doctoral candidate in liturgy and theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

in the Supper. All this is a privilege of arresting significance.

Yet much in our culture seems to make Sunday worship a time of frustration. Many barriers prevent us from experiencing worship as a privilege. And part of the problem lies with those who worship. We expect the most from worship leaders, but prepare little or not at all ourselves. Part of the problem lies with those of us who lead in worship. We oscillate between nervous clinging to liturgical traditions and endless innovation that caters to market pressures. Sadly, these tensions have erupted into serious disputes in some congregations. One publication even announced that the 1990s were a period of "worship wars."<sup>1</sup> This situation challenges all of us to pray sincerely and to reflect thoughtfully about what we do when we gather for worship and why.

Toward this end, this essay attempts to do three things: first, to describe the worship of the past generation; second, to outline some of the key features of a Reformed theology of worship; and third, to make some practical suggestions for planning and leading congregational worship today. These three sections can only begin to tackle some of the fascinating aspects of worship at the end of the twentieth century. So, in each case, I will suggest sources for further reading in the accompanying endnotes.

The central theme in the following analysis is the theme of "discernment." Contemporary North American religious culture bombards us with hosts of programs and possibilities for every aspect of church life, including worship. Only

Spirit-led discernment can help us work within this culture to shape worship that is at once deeply biblical and Christ-centered as well as powerfully relevant and meaningful for a broken and hurting world.

### **I. Recent History of Protestant Worship**

Let's begin with a bird's-eye view of worship today. What defines us as North American Christians at worship in the last part of the twentieth century? What will historians in the year 2050 say about us and our worship? Now of course, telling the story mid-stream is certainly problematic. We can't hope for a complete account at this point. But my best guess—and one supported by conversations with such diverse groups as charismatic Episcopalians, mainline Methodists, and passionate evangelicals—is that future historians might point to four movements or trends in worship at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

The first catalyst for change has been the worldwide, ecumenical Liturgical Movement.<sup>3</sup> This is a movement of liturgical scholars, publishers of liturgical materials, and congregational worship leaders that has been going on for 50 years or more. This movement—which should *not* be confused with “high church” worship—has upheld the following goals: 1) to open up the riches of the gospel in worship, with particular attention to the death and resurrection of Christ, 2) to encourage the “full, conscious, and active” participation of the congregation in worship, and 3) to recover the ancient pattern of Word and Table as the normal pattern for Sunday worship. The catalyst for these goals has been extensive study of both biblical and early Christian worship. Out of these goals have (re-)emerged the following worship practices: the Christian Year as an annual retelling of events in salvation history; the common lectionary to promote the reading of significant portions of Scripture in worship and preaching of the “whole counsel of God”; an emphasis on expository sermons, and the recovery of the ancient prayer of thanksgiving as part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. These liturgical reforms have been widely adopted, though in varying degrees, throughout Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. The published worship resources of many Baptist,

Disciples of Christ, Evangelical, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations have all reflected these priorities, often borrowing liturgical texts, hymns, and patterns from each other.<sup>4</sup> It might be said, somewhat tongue in cheek, that this movement has made liberal Methodists take the Bible seriously, conservative Catholics take the laity seriously, Anglican rectors take preaching seriously, and some charismatics take the sacraments seriously—in short, an impressive showing. For the Christian Reformed Church some of these priorities, such as text-based preaching, are not new. Others, like the use of the full prayer of thanksgiving at the Lord's Supper, are a recovery of practices of the early Church, but are essentially new to the experience of most CR congregations.

Second, worship in nearly every Christian tradition has been influenced by the Charismatic movement.<sup>5</sup> A series of revivals in the late 1960s, which resembled the earlier Pentecostal outpourings at the beginning of the twentieth century, soon led to important changes in weekly congregational worship. Like the Liturgical Movement, the charismatic movement has emphasized all people participating in worship through active use of the body. Particularly characteristic of the Charismatic movement has been the use of both contemplative and exuberant songs of praise and prayer, services of healing, times for ministry and prayer among small groups of worshippers, and—in some settings—speaking in tongues. Closely related to (and perhaps a second generation of) the charismatic movement is the Praise-and-Worship movement. The emphases of “P&W” worship include viewing exuberant praise as the basic act of worship, the use of several simple scripture songs or praise choruses, a sequence of actions that leads the congregation from more exuberant praise to more contemplative worship, and the use of a team of lay worship leaders.

Third, there has been a growing movement to consider public worship as a primary vehicle for evangelism, to promote what is called “front door” evangelism.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 1970s, the prevailing emphasis in evangelism literature was on individual contacts with non-Christians through such means as door-to-door campaigns. In the 1980s

this strategy was complemented by one which called for the weekly public gathering of the church to be the primary opportunity for evangelism (a new strategy for many congregations, but nothing new for most evangelical congregations). Particularly influential in this movement have been church-growth expert Carl George, market analyst George Barna, church consultant Lyle Schaller, and pastors Bill Hybels and Robert Schuller. This broad movement has encouraged congregations both to make worship services more accessible to non-Christians and to plan events specifically to address the needs and concerns of non-Christians. This movement has used the resources of sociological analysis to identify the particular shape of North American culture. As a result, a whole new terminology for worship has been developed: seeker-sensitive worship, seeker-driven worship, boomer worship, and buster worship.

Fourth, cultural diversity has enriched worship for Christians of all backgrounds and traditions.<sup>7</sup> Nearly every denominational hymnal includes songs in a number of languages. Some denominations are publishing separate worship books and hymnals for particular cultural traditions. The Lutheran and Methodist churches, to name just two, are in the process of releasing impressive worship books and hymnals for Spanish-speaking churches in North America. Following the pattern of most denominations, the Christian Reformed Church has also experienced growth in cultural diversity both in the denomination as a whole and within many congregations. In fact, worship in the Christian Reformed Church in North America is offered in twelve languages each week. This diversity has led to sharing of musical and textual resources among cultural traditions.

Importantly, all four of these movements have been reflected in and shaped by the economic demands of the publishing industry. Through the first two-thirds of this century, many Christian Reformed congregations, like those from other denominations, relied almost solely on synodically-approved texts and materials provided by denominational publishing ministries. Now congregations look for worship materials—including prayer texts, songs, hymns, and dramatic scripts—from large independent publishing

companies, in addition to those provided by CRC Publications. At one level, this is an ecumenical movement of sorts. We now learn from and are enriched by the contributions of a wide range of other Reformed, mainline, and evangelical movements and churches. On another level, this has meant that we are subject to the influence of an aggressively market-driven publishing industry.

Certainly none of these developments is completely isolated from the others. Often worship in a particular congregation may reflect the influence of several of them. Any given congregation may sing praise choruses, celebrate the Christian year, and sing hymns from Africa

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and Asia. In fact, when historians look at us some day, they may identify *eclecticism* as the central feature of much public worship at the end of the twentieth century among North American Protestants.

But why tell this history, why identify these movements? It is important, I believe, to help us in our task of discernment. Identifying these four movements are important for giving us a balanced view of the current situation of churches in North America.<sup>8</sup> Some church consultants or publishing companies promote a view of worship practices that is inaccurate and simplistic: “churches used to have only traditional worship, but now we have matured into contemporary worship. We used to sing hymns. Now we sing praise choruses.” This view can too easily pit so-called “traditional” and “contemporary” worship against each other as two irreconcilable alternatives. The truth is more complex. The Spirit has been working through many church communities in many worship styles. Our joyful privilege is that of discerning the very best from all of the liturgical texts, songs, and art that have been produced. We should learn from both

exuberant praise songs and ancient prayers of thanksgiving for the Lord's Supper, from both time-tested hymns of faith and energetic songs from Asian and African cultures, from both traditional calls for deeply biblical preaching and from recent calls to make worship accessible to non-Christians.

## II. Reformed Theology of Liturgy

But this exercise in history is incomplete by itself. Our efforts at discerning need a rudder or guide. And this, of course, is provided by Scripture. One of the central features of traditional Reformed theology of worship is its insistence that worship should be "according to Scripture." Our worship of God must arise out of the knowledge of God we have through Scripture. This is not in any way a burden, for we long for the true knowledge of God as a basis for our worship. And indeed, Scripture has a great deal to teach us about worship. Some of its key lessons are the following.

\*Worship must be the sincere offering of the heart. Hypocrisy and insincerity are two great antonyms for right worship (Genesis 4:1-12; Isaiah 1:11-17; Amos 5:21-24).

\*The twin virtues of right worship are "spirit" and "truth." Worship arises out of the prompting by the Holy Spirit and in ways that are fitting to God's truth revealed in Christ (John 4:24).

\*Public worship is designed for building up the body of Christ. Paul's short treatise on worship to the church in Corinth reminds us that our liturgy is designed to build each other up in faith (I Corinthians 10-14).

\*All of our lives are to be an offering of worship to the Lord. Worship is never limited to what happens on Sunday (Romans 12:1-2).

\*Our praise of God is rooted in what God has told us in the Word. Our singing of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" has as its chief purpose that "the Word of God may dwell in us richly" (Colossians 3:16).

\*Baptism and the Lord's Supper are acts of obedience to the Lord. Jesus specifically commanded that these actions be observed by the Christian community (Matthew 28:19, I Corinthians 11:26).

\*When we approach God, our hearts are rightly filled with awe and wonder. Because of Jesus Christ, and the direct access he provides to God (Hebrews 4:14-16), we need not tremble in terror at this encounter.

Each of these lessons, and many others, have direct bearing on how we worship.<sup>9</sup> Studying these texts should be the regular practice of worship leaders, church councils, and worship committees. In fact, many disagreements regarding worship and worship styles are due to focusing more on technique than on these central teachings of Scripture.

For the purposes of this essay, consider one additional scriptural teaching, a theme that has been central to the theological vision for worship of many leaders in the Reformed tradition. The theme is this: in worship, the primary agent, the one who acts, is God himself. God is active in and through the worship of the church, working to instill and purify the faith and obedience of his people.

As John Calvin saw it, for example, the weekly assembly of the church for public worship was no ordinary gathering. It was an event charged with divine activity, an arena in which the divine-human relationship was depicted and enacted. In public worship, God was not only the One to whom worship was directed, but also the One active in the worship of the church. Through public worship—that is, through public prayers, preaching, and the celebration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper—God actively worked to draw human beings into fellowship with himself. Only the most exalted language could convey the significance of this event. As Calvin himself expressed it: "it is an instance of the inestimable grace of God, that so far as the infirmity of our flesh will permit, we are lifted up even to God by the exercises of religion. That is the design of the preaching of the word, the sacraments, the holy assemblies, and the whole external government of the church, but that we may be united to God."<sup>10</sup>

This vision is further described by Calvin through metaphors. The most pervasive image for Calvin is that of bi-directional movement between God and humanity: in and through the assembly, God moves down toward humanity so that

humanity might rise to God. Worship is movement, up and down. God descends that we might ascend. This was true, Calvin believed, already for the worship Israel rendered to God under the terms of the Old Covenant. Concerning the temple and ark of the covenant, Calvin wrote: “. . . as [God] was not tied to one place, so the last thing He intended was to tie down His people to earthly symbols. *On the contrary He comes down to them, in order to lift them up on high to Himself.* . . . He merely uses symbols as intermediaries with which to introduce Himself in familiar ways to slow men until, step by step, they ascend to heaven.”<sup>11</sup> In this pictorial way, Calvin describes the inner dynamic of public worship, as it were, on a cosmic vertical axis.

The first movement in this dynamic sweep is always God’s move toward humanity. Here we are thrust into a central and distinctive feature of Calvin’s thought: God’s accommodation to human capacity. God is fundamentally a being who condescends, who deigns to move “down” toward humanity. This first downward movement of worship is complemented by the upward movement of God’s people in the power of the Spirit. The language of ascent is a refrain that echoes throughout Calvin’s *corpus*. Nearly every text on public prayer, preaching, and the sacraments enjoins Christians to use these means to *rise* to God. Calvin’s Sermon on II Samuel 6:1-7 is a typical example:

Thus, we must note that when God declares himself to us, we must not cling to any earthly thing, but must elevate our senses above the world, and lift ourselves up by faith to his eternal glory. In sum, God comes down to us so that then we might go up to him. That is why the sacraments are compared to the steps of a ladder. For as I have said, if we want to go there, alas, we do not have wings; we are so small that we cannot make it. God, therefore, must come down to seek us. But when he has come down, it is not to make us dull-witted; it is not to make us imagine that he is like us. Rather, it is so that we might go up little by little, by degrees, as we climb up a ladder one rung at a time.<sup>12</sup>

Public worship is like a ladder. Perhaps no image crystallizes so concretely Calvin’s liturgical vision.

Calvin fleshed out this vision with metaphors drawn from the human senses. First, Calvin described public worship as an occasion for God’s speech. In fact, for Calvin, “the main part of true and right worship and service is to hear God speaking.”<sup>13</sup> God’s speech is realized, in part, through the preaching of the Word. Commenting on Isaiah 11:4, Calvin asserted, “Christ acts by [his ministers] in such a manner that He wishes their mouths to be reckoned as His mouth, and their lips as His lips.”<sup>14</sup> Even in visual and sacramental signs, God speaks: “although we must maintain the distinction between the word and the sign; yet let us know, that as soon as the sign itself meets our eyes, the word ought to sound in our ears.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, in worship, through word and sign, God speaks.

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But the speech metaphor, no matter how significant it might be to Calvin’s view of God and of divine revelation, is not the only sensory modality he invokes in depicting public worship. For the nature of public worship can also be explained by a comparison to human sight. “The Word, sacraments, public prayers, and other helps of this kind, cannot be neglected, without a wicked contempt of God, who manifests himself to us in these ordinances, *as in a mirror or image.*”<sup>16</sup> Public worship is not only like a conversation or dialogue, it is also like a mirror or image. The same is true of sacraments: “The believer, when he sees the sacraments with his own eyes, does not halt at the *physical sight of them*, but by those steps (which I have indicated by analogy) rises up in devout contemplation to those lofty mysteries which lie hidden in the sacraments.”<sup>17</sup> Physical sight and spiritual perception thus are bound up with the downward and upward movement of worship. Because God has descended toward humanity and provided external forms for worship, humanity

can rise to God through correct perception of God and God's works.

This gallery of sensory images is completed by the metaphor of food. For worship is also nourishment, the giving, tasting and receiving of spiritual food. This metaphor is certainly most naturally applicable to the Lord's Supper. Calvin's writings on the Lord's Supper feature this metaphor prominently:

... from the physical things set forth in the Sacrament we are led by a sort of analogy to spiritual things. Thus, when bread is given as a symbol of Christ's body, we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ's body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul. When we see wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefit which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ's blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden.<sup>18</sup>

Yet spiritual nourishment is in no way limited to the Lord's Supper. *Both* the preaching of the gospel *and* the Lord's Supper are instances of spiritual nourishment: "daily he gives it [his body as spiritual food] when by the word of the gospel he offers it for us to partake, . . . when he seals such giving of himself by the sacred mystery of the Supper, and when he inwardly fulfills what he outwardly designates."<sup>19</sup>

In sum, Calvin sees public worship as first of all divine activity. In worship, God is accommodating to human capacity, speaking the Word, presenting mirrors of divine love and grace, and offering spiritual food to his dearly loved children. Then the Holy Spirit lifts worshippers right into heaven, unites them with Jesus Christ, very God of very God. In short, worship is nothing less than a miracle. Thus, a central theme in Reformed theology is that worship is God's work. Through the tangible acts of the community—preaching, sacraments, public prayers, praise, and the giving of alms—God is working to draw us to himself.<sup>20</sup>

I would argue that this brief description of a single aspect of Calvin's theology of worship is immeasurably helpful for us today. The following

paragraphs highlight five specific implications of this poignant sense of God's activity in and through worship.

First, this view redirects conversation about worship. Often our discussions about worship focus on technique. We analyze the preacher's ability to communicate. We decide whether or not we happen to like a certain style of music. We discuss who in the congregation is allowed to lead certain acts of worship. These discussions can be very useful. But Calvin's vision challenges us to relegate these questions to secondary status. Calvin's vision challenges us to permeate all conversations with prayerful thanksgiving for the sheer gift of worship and to prepare for worship with high expectations for what God is doing in the life of the community. Calvin's vision challenges us to acknowledge how unique public worship is. It reminds us that gathering for worship is no merely human gathering. It is qualitatively different from a political caucus, a school-board meeting, a musical concert, or an educational lecture. The point of liturgy is not to teach, to entertain, to inform, but rather to enact the relationship with God which we share in Christ.

Second, this theological vision provides a number of images and metaphors for teaching and preaching about worship. We learn about worship not only from Psalms of praise (e.g., "worship the Lord, all the earth"), but also from the many texts that speak of God's activity in and through worship. Central biblical texts in this vision include passages in Hebrews that speak of Christ as intercessor, passages in Romans and Galatians that identify the Holy Spirit as the prompter of our prayer, as well as Old Testament portraits of corporate worship as covenant renewal, where the people's response to God always follows and responds to God's gracious acts of revelation and promise. These texts are very good places to start when elders plan devotions for worship committee meetings, when pastors plan to preach on worship, or when artists or musicians prepare to lead in worship.

Third, this vision guides and shapes the language we use to lead worship. When we lead worship, we must always be aware of the utter privilege it is to invoke God's very name and

to call for God to act in our midst. When we lead worship, this vision leads us to be less inclined to say, "Ok, so now we will have a silent prayer and then we will sing a hymn," and more inclined to say, "When we come before God—our response includes both hushed silence and exuberant praise." Even the way we introduce a hymn can reflect our sense of wonder and anticipation for what God is doing in and through the worship of the church.

Fourth, this perspective challenges us to enhance rather than to obscure the moments in liturgy that call attention to the fact that worship is an encounter with God through his Spirit. The Reformed tradition has always placed a high value on the moments in liturgy which enact God's Word to us: the greeting, the assurance of pardon following the confession of sin, the sermon, the benediction. Though less well known, the Reformed tradition has also traditionally valued praying specifically for God to act powerfully through Word and sacrament: praying for illumination prior to the service of the Word and the praying for the Holy Spirit (the *epiclesis*) at the Lord's Supper. Now, it is true that nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to have a weekly declaration of pardon following confession of sin, nor a weekly prayer for illumination. Yet including these in the weekly pattern of liturgy (and leading them with conviction!) anchors our liturgy in God's action toward us. These are liturgical actions that are fitting to the knowledge of God that we discover in Scripture.

Fifth, this vision challenges us to maintain and strengthen our use of preaching and the sacraments in public worship. As Reformed Christians, we have a rich heritage of both preaching and sacramental theology and practice. In traditional Reformed theology, these liturgical actions are called "means of grace." They are the "marks of the true church." They are a matter of confessional importance, not simply a matter of personal preference. As such, they ought to be more important to us than certain issues that do not have confessional stature. Among the loveliest lines of our heritage are these from the Article 33 of the Belgic Confession:

We believe that our good God, mindful of our crudeness and weakness,

has ordained sacraments for us to seal  
his promises in us,  
to pledge his good will and grace toward us,  
and also to nourish and sustain our faith.

He has added these to the Word of the gospel  
to represent better to our external senses  
both what he enables us to understand by  
his Word and what he does inwardly  
in our hearts, confirming in us the  
salvation he imparts to us.

For they are visible signs and seals of  
something internal and invisible,  
by means of which God works in us  
through the power of the Holy Spirit.  
So they are not empty and hollow signs to  
fool and deceive us,

for their truth is Jesus Christ,  
without whom they would be nothing. . . .

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Vital worshiping congregations are those that prize deeply biblical preaching and the joyful receiving of the Christian sacraments. As such, we must not think that the sacraments are mere symbols that point to something else. They are not simply an act of faith, a work that we render. No, the sacraments, to use the confession's language, are means by which "God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit." These are treasured gifts for us to receive and to cultivate. Some congregations have greatly benefited by celebrating the Lord's Supper more frequently (Calvin, we know, wanted weekly communion for his congregation). Others have greatly benefited from the use of the celebrative Lord's Supper prayers like those used by the early church (see below). And all worshippers benefit as they grow in the knowledge that God is active constantly working through his Spirit in the weekly gathering of the church to inspire, nourish, sustain, and challenge his dearly loved people.



### III. Creative Planning From Within the Tradition

But now that we've wrestled with recent history and with our theological heritage, it is time to put our thinking into practice. How are we to lead worship at the end of the twentieth century? How will we address all the changes and calls for change in worship? How are we to enact this theological vision for public worship?

Consider the following five specific suggestions for planning and leading worship in your congregation.<sup>21</sup> Each of these suggestions corresponds to regular acts of worship in most liturgical traditions. These ideas are primarily directed to those who plan and lead worship, but also will be helpful to all who gather each week. I have chosen these particular ideas for two reasons. First, they enhance, rather than obscure, the chief purpose of a given liturgical action. Second, they attempt to balance creativity and the genius of traditional worship, to move beyond the often frustrating disputes regarding so-called "traditional" and "contemporary" worship. Space does not permit a complete catalogue of possibilities—but perhaps these few examples will make the point that creativity and tradition need not be antonyms.

#### 1. PREPARATION FOR WORSHIP

First, thoughtful participation in liturgy requires preparation. Just as one's experience of a concert is enriched by reading program notes, just as one's golf game is helped by a trip to the driving range, so too our experience in worship is deepened by prayerful preparation. Consider distributing to your congregation a simple guide for personal and family worship one week in advance or at the beginning of a given season in the Christian year. For example, for a service based on the first petition of the Lord's Prayer, distribute something like the following guide:

First Petition:

*Our Father in Heaven,  
Hallowed Be Your Name*

Psalm 103

New Testament Reading: Galatians 4:1-7,  
I John 3:1

Reflections:

Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim the honor of being a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ?"

"By the great sweetness of this name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father. . . . For he is not only a father but by far the best and kindest of all fathers, provided we still cast ourselves upon his mercy, although we are ungrateful, rebellious, and forward children.

John Calvin,  
*Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Hymn: "Children of the Heavenly Father"

Prayer:

Lord God, Help us to really know you,  
to bless, worship, and praise you for all  
your works and for all that shines  
forth from them:

your almighty power, wisdom, kindness,  
justice, mercy and truth.

Help us to direct all our living—  
what we think, say, and do—

so that your name will never be  
blasphemed because of us,

but always honored and praised. Amen.

—Heidelberg Catechism

Invite worshippers to use these texts—to pray these prayers, read these Scripture lessons, and sing these psalms and hymns—prior to worship. Then use the same texts in the Sunday liturgy. Familiarity with these texts will allow worshippers to enter more fully into the spirit and meaning of these profound expressions. Preparing these guides may seem like a daunting task, but these texts are widely available in materials that pastors often study in sermon preparation. A little extra work in preparation can have many benefits for worshippers.

#### 2. THE READING OF SCRIPTURE

Second, reading Scripture is a central act of worship for all Christians. Scripture is God's gift that we must receive each week with joy and anticipation. We should make every effort to

highlight the reading of Scripture in the liturgy. Consider rendering narrative passages of Scripture through choral readings by assigning the voices of various characters to different readers. The following example is a simple choral reading based on Matthew 26: 47-68.

Matthew 26:47-68 (for six readers)

1. While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.
2. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."
3. Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.
2. Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"
2. At that time Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.
3. Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the

guards to see the outcome.

3. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.
4. 5. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'"
  6. Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"
  2. But Jesus remained silent.
  6. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."
  2. "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."
  6. Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"
  4. 5. "He is worthy of death," they answered.
  4. 5. Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophesy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

Choral readings require rehearsal. In fact, nothing like this should be attempted without preparing carefully. But these rehearsals need not be a burden—they are a very helpful educational opportunity. Perhaps church school classes who study a given text can be asked to render that text in worship. Then their careful study can enrich the worship of the whole congregation.

### 3. CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER

Third, consider the weekly prayers of intercession. Often this prayer is called the “congregational prayer,” “the pastoral prayer,” or “the prayers of the people.” This, too, is an important moment in worship that requires thoughtful preparation. Our goal as worship leaders must be to nurture an “intercessory spirituality” that seeks to turn every dimension of our lives in the world into a topic for liturgical prayer. Consider introducing intercessory prayer by a simple, unadorned reading of headlines from weekly newspapers to focus attention on the priestly role of the church for the world, as in the following example of an intercessory prayer for two worship leaders:

[Introduction]: Our prayers will be divided into three sections,

- prayers for national and international concerns,
- prayers for local, community needs,
- prayers for personal, individual brokenness.

To make our prayers concrete, each prayer will be preceded by a list of newspaper headlines from the past week.

We pray now for the brokenness of our nation and world.

- 1: Dateline, September 1995  
—Serbs, Croats Resume Fighting in Croatia  
—South Africa Death Toll Rises to 25 in Attacks  
—Agents Discover Fake Visa Ring  
—Two More Arrested in Tourist’s Death

- 2: God of power, God of mercy  
We lament before you the brokenness of our world,  
    a world of war  
        of disease  
        of mistrust  
        of violence.  
We claim your promise to be with us.  
In your power, heal our world we pray. . . .  
[silent prayers]

- 1: We pray now for the brokenness of our local community.  
2: Dateline, September 1995  
—Vandals Break in at Local School  
—Charges dropped in Prostitution Case  
—One Hospitalized, Another Arrested in Stabbing

- 1: Our gracious God,  
Our community, too, is broken.  
The institutions that hold us together often seem to be breaking,  
The comfort of our lives is often disturbed by fear.

- 2: We pray now for individual, personal needs and brokenness. . . . [silent prayers]

- 1: Dateline, September 1995:  
—Loneliness: America’s Greatest Killer  
—Two More Press Claims of Sex Discrimination  
—Numbers of Abused Children up this Year  
—Worker Dissatisfaction High at Local Plant

- 2: Loving God,  
so many lives are broken and filled with pain,  
haunted with memories of failure, guilt, abuse  
stuck in ruts of boredom and loneliness,  
searching for meaning and happiness.  
We pray for your comforting presence,  
for your power to heal and forgive.  
Work powerfully in our world, we pray. . . .  
[silent prayers]  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

- [Assurance] Jesus said: Come to me—all you who labor and are heavily burdened—and I will give you *rest*.  
Take *my* yoke upon you and learn from *me*, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and *you* will find *rest* for your *souls*,  
2: Friends in Christ,  
Jesus died for us and rose again in victory.  
His words are sure. In him, we find life and *rest* for our souls.

Each time we read a newspaper or watch the evening news, we are preparing for liturgical prayer. Likewise, each time we join in liturgical prayer, we are preparing to read the newspaper and watch the evening news. This liturgical suggestion takes that seriously. Then also, consider three other suggestions: Include in the prayers of the people each week one prayer from Christians who live in a different country.<sup>22</sup> Include in intercessory prayer specific references to the vocations of two or three members of the congregation and the particular dilemmas they face, moving systematically to include each member of the local church community over time. Or, consider forming a prayer on the basis of Scripture itself, where extemporaneous prayer follows and improvises on the reading of a Scripture prayer.

\*Psalm 51: from confession to renewal to commitment:

Leader 1: Psalm 51:1-6: "Have mercy on me . . ."

Leader 2: Extemporaneous Prayer of Confession

Leader 1: Psalm 51:7-12: "Cleanse me . . . create in me a pure heart . . ."

Leader 2: Extemporaneous Prayer for Renewal

Leader 1: Psalm 51:13-19: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways . . ."

Leader 2: Extemporaneous Prayer of Dedication

In short, invest energy in making the prayers of the people one of the *highlights* of weekly Sunday worship.

#### 4. THE LORD'S SUPPER

Fourth, the Lord's Supper should be celebrated with both reverence and heartfelt joy. Everything about the celebration should convey that this sacrament is one of God's greatest gifts. This should first of all be reflected in the language used at the Table of the Lord. The following liturgy (from the text approved by the CRC Synod of 1994) is patterned after the ancient prayer of

thanksgiving used at the Lord's Supper services of the early church. It incorporates the familiar lines of the Heidelberg Catechism, the ancient hymn of praise "Holy, Holy, Holy," and those ancient words so influential in Calvin's theology ("Lift up your heart to the Lord").

#### The Teaching of the Lord's Supper

With these words our Lord commands all believers  
to eat this broken bread and to drink this cup  
in true faith and in the confident hope of his return in glory.

In this Supper God declares to us  
that our sins have been completely forgiven  
through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ,  
which he himself finished on the cross  
once for all.

He also declares to us  
that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ,  
who with his very body  
is now in heaven at the right hand of  
the Father,  
where he wants us to worship him.  
(Adapted from the Heidelberg Catechism,  
Q&A 75, 80)

#### The Thanksgiving

Minister: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them up to the Lord.

Minister: Let us give thanks to the Lord  
our God.

People: It is right for us to give thanks  
and praise.

Minister: With joy we praise you,  
gracious God,  
for you have created heaven and earth,  
made us in your image, and kept covenant  
with us—even when we fell into sin.  
We give you thanks for Jesus Christ,  
our Lord,  
who by his life, death, and resurrection  
opened to us the way of everlasting life.  
Therefore we join our voices  
with all the saints and angels and the

whole creation  
to proclaim the glory of your name.

All: [Sing the Sanctus (Psalter Hymnal 249:4  
or 626) or another song of praise.]

### **The Institution**

We give thanks to God the Father that our Savior, Jesus Christ, before he suffered, gave us this memorial of his sacrifice, until he comes again. At his last supper, the Lord Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it [here the minister breaks the bread] and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he took the cup after supper [here the minister pours the wine] and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this in remembrance of me." For whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (I Corinthians 11:23-26). Therefore we proclaim our faith as signed and sealed in this sacrament:

**Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

### **Prayer of Consecration**

Lord, our God, send your Holy Spirit so that this bread and cup may be for us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we and all your saints be united with Christ and remain faithful in hope and love. Gather your whole church, O Lord, into the glory of your kingdom. We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray,

**"Our Father in heaven . . . Amen."**

[or sing the Lord's Prayer (Psalter Hymnal 207 or 208)]

### **The Invitation**

Congregation of Jesus Christ, the Lord has prepared his table for all who love him and trust in him alone for their salvation. All who are truly sorry for their sins, who sincerely believe in the Lord Jesus as their Savior, and who desire to live in obedience to him as Lord, are now invited to come with gladness to the table of the Lord.

**The gifts of God for the people of God!**

### **The Communion**

These words "sing." They are both weighty

and buoyant, both direct and imaginative. Consider incorporating these "new" words in your sacramental celebrations.

## **5. CONGREGATIONAL SONG**

Finally, consider music, the songs of the people. (I have purposely saved music for last, for music is often a lightning rod for disagreements regarding styles of worship—a burden that neither the music itself, nor the musicians who make the music, should have to bear.) Here keep two important principles in mind. First, primary liturgical music is always the song of the people, the song of the whole congregation gathered in Jesus' name. Second, liturgical music is always rendered for a particular liturgical purpose.

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*First, primary liturgical music is always the song of the people, the song of the whole congregation gathered in Jesus' name.*

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Some music is prayer—our words to God. Some music is proclamation—whereby we proclaim God's Word to us. And some music is exhortation—our words to each other. If we sing "have mercy on me, O Lord," we are singing a prayer, our speech to God. If we sing "the Word became flesh and lived among us," we proclaim God's Word, God's speech to us. If we sing "Let All Things Now Living," we are commanding each other to praise God. In this way, the music we sing in worship fits the "script" of worship. In other words, music is never offered for its own sake. It is always offered for a particular liturgical purpose.

Based on this perspective, consider identifying every piece of music the congregation sings by its particular liturgical function. Instead of printing in your printed order of service "hymn," print "sung prayer of confession." Instead of choosing just any hymn to follow the sermon, choose one that is proclamatory in character, that declares the Word of the Lord, just as the sermon does. After a sermon on God's care and protection, sing boldly "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Instead of

singing five praise choruses in a row, sing choruses that progress thoughtfully from praise to confession to assurance to thanksgiving. In short, make sure that every piece of music is chosen for a particular liturgical purpose, and not simply because it is a nice song.

I emphasize this functional approach to liturgical music because this can help a congregation get past the endless struggles over whether to use so-called “traditional” or “contemporary” music. Traditional music lovers are more willing to sing a contemporary chorus if it is chosen for a particular liturgical reason than if it is simply chosen because of its catchy melody. Likewise, lovers of praise choruses are more willing and able to enter into the spirit and profound meaning of an ancient hymn if it is chosen as the perfect complement to a given sermon theme or liturgical action.

In sum, these fairly straightforward ideas all combine creativity with the traditional themes and elements of worship. Creativity without tradition leads to endless, rootless innovation. Tradition without creativity can lead to dead traditionalism. Together, tradition and creativity can help worship leaders and worshippers alike to realize a bit more what a great privilege it is to render worship to God in Christ through the power of the Spirit.

In conclusion, we must admit, a perfectly clear view of history, a refined and deeply passionate theological vision for public worship, and the best blend of creativity and tradition cannot prevent disputes within congregations regarding worship. We obey I Cor. 13; we must love one another. Following his discussion of one liturgical point of contention, John Calvin simply advised, “But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, this historical and theological analysis can not ensure right worship. All of our striving for right worship is worth nothing, unless it is gathered up by the power and grace of the Spirit’s presence in our midst. Worship is the Spirit’s work from start to finish. We live on the basis of the sure and firm promise of God to send the Spirit. And we pray without ceasing, “Come, Holy Spirit, come.”

- 1 *Dialog*, November 1994.
- 2 Some of the following paragraphs were submitted in an earlier version to the synodical study committee of the Christian Reformed Church which has developed a report for Synod on worship and contemporary culture.
- 3 For a more complete history of this movement, see John Fenwick and Bryan Spinks, *Worship in Transition: The Liturgical Movement in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Continuum Books, 1995).
- 4 For representative texts produced by proponents of this movement, see the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993); Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, and James F. White, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992); and the periodical publication *Reformed Liturgy and Music*.
- 5 For more on this, see Robert E. Webber, *Signs of Wonder: The Phenomenon of Convergence in Liturgical and Charismatic Churches* (Nashville: Star Song, 1992).
- 6 For more on this, see Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); and Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). For a balanced view, read both books. See also Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Craig Miller and Daniel Benedict, *Contemporary Worship for the 21st Century: Worship or Evangelism?* (Abingdon Discipleship Resources, 1995) and Frank C. Senn, *The Witness of the Worshipping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).
- 7 For more on this, see Melva Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); Melva Costen and Darius L. Swann, *The Black Christian Worship*

*Experience* (Black Church Scholar Series, vol. IV. Atlanta: ITC Press, 1992); Mark R. Francis, *Liturgy in a Multi-Cultural Community* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991); and *Hymns from the Four Winds. A Collection of Asian American Hymns* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983).

- 8 This analysis can helpfully be balanced by analysis of contemporary North American culture. For this, see the forthcoming report "Worship and Contemporary Culture," which will be discussed by the 1997 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church.
- 9 For further reflection on these topics, see David Peterson, *Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That is Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1984), and Hughes Oliphant Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology: Some Thoughts on the Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).
- 10 Comm. [=Commentary on] Ps. 24:7. See also Comm. Ps. 52:8: "Let us engrave the useful lesson upon our hearts, that we should consider it the great end of our existence to be found numbered amongst the worshippers of God; and that we should avail ourselves of the inestimable privilege of the stated assemblies of the Church, which are necessary helps to our infirmity and means of mutual excitement and encouragement. By these, and our common sacraments, the Lord who is one God, and who designed that we should be one in him, is training us up together in the hope of eternal life, and in the united celebration of his holy name." English translations of the Calvin's Old Testament commentaries are from *Calvin's Commentaries* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948-1953). Translations from the New Testament Commentaries are from *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959-1972).
- 11 Comm. Acts 17:23. This language of ascent and descent is helpful to the extent that it depicts worship as a genuine encounter with God. It is often, however, associated with Neo-Platonic philosophy that depreciates creation and the embodied nature of human beings. The metaphors of speech, image, and food do temper this sense in Calvin's writings about worship. But this is a topic that calls for further study, in conversations with the extant scholarly literature on the influence of Neo-Platonism in sixteenth century theology.
- 12 "The True Worship of God" (July 3, 1562), *Sermons on II Samuel*, 234.
- 13 Comm. Jer. 7:21.
- 14 Comm. Is. 11:4.
- 15 Comm. Gen. 17.
- 16 Comm. Ps. 27:4.
- 17 Inst. 4.14.5. [*Inst.*=*Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20-21 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960)].
- 18 Inst. 4.17.3.
- 19 Inst. 4.17.5.
- 20 In the twentieth century, this is the central theme in liturgical writings of Karl Barth, Jean-Jacques von Allmen, Hughes Oliphant Old, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, to name a few.
- 21 These are only representative ideas. For others, and for general help in planning worship, see Howard Vanderwell and Norma deWaal-Malefyt, *Lift Your Heart to the Lord* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1995); and the periodical *Reformed Worship* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications).
- 22 See, for example, the prayers printed in *With All God's People: The New Ecumenical Prayer Cycle* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989).
- 22 Inst. 4.10.30.