

Fuller Theological Seminary

WORSHIP AS HABITS OF
RITUAL AND SOCIAL ACTION

By Eric D. Herron
March 10, 2006
Dr. Todd Johnson
CH507: Worship History and Theology
Final Paper

INTRODUCTION

If I had to place myself in any one liturgical tradition I would probably fit best in some manifestation of Baptist worship. When I came to college in California and started attending NewSong Church in Pomona, I found the non-denominational feel and Baptist theology very comfortable. As I transitioned from being a worship intern to serving as full-time staff, it became necessary for me to discover exactly what I believed about worship.

Defining Worship, and Defining Worship Again

The missions pastor at NewSong and I worked on a definition together and came up with a sentence I've used over and over again for the last ten years. It goes like this: "Worship is our whole-hearted response to an accurate understanding of who God is, what he says, and what he does."¹ This definition has served me well through many interactions with worshipers and toward guiding my own thinking about worship.

Having deepened my knowledge of worship history and theology in the seminary, I have concluded that this trusty definition needs some retooling. I have innovated a new sentence that expresses some of the things I have learned recently and contains a more complete explanation of what I believe about worship today. Here it is:

Worship is the habit of ritual and social action with which we experientially and thankfully acknowledge God's supremacy and simultaneously train our souls to embrace him more deeply.

¹ Paul Kaak (now, a consultant with The Leadership Institute) and I formulated this definition circa 1993 from a shorter, original definition by Warren Wiersbe in his book, *Real Worship*.

I would like to spend the remainder of this paper unpacking this definition. This will be done, first, through contrast with my older definition and second, through tracking the evolution of ordo and practices at NewSong Church from 1989-2006.

The Evolution of a Definition

My old definition has been altered in two distinct ways. The word “habit” has been inserted to reveal an additional *function* of worship previously unmentioned. Second, there is the addition of “social action” to further differentiate the *type of action* involved in a worship response.

First, this definition has been adjusted to incorporate the idea of *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*.² During my early years of coming to understand worship and eventually leading it myself, I had always emphasized my response to God simply “for who He is, what He says, and what He does.” In other words, any pragmatic or personal value in worship was secondary to the pure adoration and exaltation of Father, Son, and Spirit *because He is worthy* of praise. I maintain this idea in the new definition as it says, “acknowledge God’s supremacy.”

However, this initial concept is now sandwiched between words that portray a second – and equally important - function of worship. This other function has to do with *spiritual formation*. Blaise Pascal, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, spoke of worship’s value to form us in faith:

We must resort to *habit* once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us, for it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us. We must acquire an easier belief, which is that of habit.³

² Literally, *Law of Prayer, Law of Belief*.

³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 274. My italics.

Pascal knows that reason itself is necessary to a point, however it is a weak teacher in “training our souls to believe in Him more deeply.” According to Pascal, dogmatic proofs and reason work “slowly” since the mind must always keep these before itself in order to believe. “Habit provides the strongest truths,” and in fact it is habit that, “convinces us and makes so many Christians.”⁴ Here, then, fits the idea that our habitual rituals of worship spiritually form us in faith. Our prayer practice enables us to “embrace him more deeply” than mere reason does.

Using the language of food, Witvliet echoes these sentiments as he speaks particularly of music in worship. He claims that our “Liturgical-Musical Diets” are important, and that “just as the physical substances in our food become building blocks for our physical bodies, so too the textual and musical substances in our singing become the building blocks for our life of faith.”⁵ Those worshipers more oriented toward dogmatic approaches need not worry that this thinking eliminates the creedal formulations of theology. Avery Dulles provides us with a balanced view:

Whether the law of prayer governs the law of believing, or vice versa, it appears from all the cases here surveyed that the two finally coalesce and support one another. As the Church prays, so it believes; as it believes, so too it prays.⁶

Moving on, my new definition includes the term “social action” in the list of possibilities for response to God in Worship. In ancient Greece, “liturgy” meant “public works” done for the benefit of society.⁷ The Eastern Orthodox believers maintain the original idea of the word “liturgy” in their phrase, “the liturgy after the Liturgy.” They understand that there exists the “weeklong liturgy of our daily work done after the weekly Liturgy of our corporate worship.”⁸ This says that worship is not confined to ritual *within* the church building, but rather it is

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 234-237.

⁶ Avery Dulles, *Theology and Worship: The Reciprocity of Faith and Belief*, 6.

⁷ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 80.

⁸ David L. Stubbs, “Ending of Worship: Ethics”, in *A More Profound Alleluia*, Leanne Van Dyk, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 136.

extended beyond four walls to reach and touch the world for Christ's kingdom. David Stubbs illuminates this "intersection" of ritual worship and ethics:

In the patterns of the liturgy we come into contact with those patterns of Christ. Because of this, as we are formed through a habitual participation in the liturgy, we grow in our ability to see the world and act in the world as Christians.⁹

Not only can our social action be truly liturgical, it is clearly linked with the aforementioned idea of habitual, spiritual formation since our ritual is seen to inform our ethical interactions with the world. So, my adjusted definition recognizes the power of ritual for *spiritual formation*, and clearly acknowledges *social action* as another category for worship response. How does my church match up to this definition? We now turn to the local body called NewSong.

NewSong Church

As part of the leadership at NewSong from 1989 until the present, I have helped shape the direction of the liturgy. My roles as Worship Intern, Worship Pastor, and finally Pastor of Celebration placed me in an environment where I had both the privilege and difficulty of struggling with a small team through liturgical decisions. Due to the length of this paper, I cannot speak of all the innovations that were made in NewSong's past. However, I wish to highlight some of the most pertinent developments. After describing the *current ordo* of NewSong, I will note past alterations in worship as they have related to *time, space, music*, and *sacrament*.

Ordo: Creatively Baptist

NewSong today has an ordo related to Baptist worship, as influenced by the historical *Frontier* developments. Currently, a service at NewSong will begin with a musical prelude

⁹ Ibid., 140.

followed by a brief welcome by the presiding musician or speaking pastor. A ten to twenty-five minute musical “worship set” ensues. Next, there may be a creative element. This may include almost any form of innovative expression that might support the spiritual theme of the day.¹⁰ It may also entail the simple reading of Scripture. Whether elaborate or simple, this element has the function of introducing the speaker’s topic for the day. Next, the speaking pastor (one of several in rotation) comes to give a twenty-five to forty minute sermon that is often more topical than exegetical. Finally, there is a response to the Word through the gathering of the tithes and offerings and more music. All service elements vary in length from week to week and are orchestrated to total approximately one hour and fifteen minutes.

Limited *Time* and the Far-Reaches of *Space*

Early in the development of NewSong, the Church *Calendar* held little or no influence over worship. Christmas and Easter were recognized as the holy days in which all should participate. Over the last fifteen years liturgical celebrations have been added. In 1990, a Good Friday service was held. This was the first step to broadening the recognition of liturgical *time* in worship. The next change came in 2000. In what might be called the most creative expression of worship at NewSong the *Stations of the Cross* supplanted the simple Good Friday worship service. This elaborate event included an extensive, walk-through labyrinth with experiential stations from Christ’s trial to his burial. In 2005, several hundred worshipers walked through this experience. The most recent addition to *Calendar* observation is the acknowledgment of Lent. Since 2003, NewSong has hosted an Ash Wednesday service, which has included responsive reading and distribution of ashes. The body is encouraged to fast during the Lenten

¹⁰ For instance, NewSong was one of the first churches to follow Willow Creek in taking seriously the use of dramatic presentations in the service. Often outlandish, original skits were written for use in the service. I especially recall the full-length Easter dramatic presentation based on the 1991 Fox comedy show called, “Herman’s Head.” Furthermore, dance, and other visual arts were incorporated often.

period in preparation for Resurrection Sunday. I have seen these changes as a meaningful recovery of observations that were lost as the American Church embarked on the western Frontier.

Space has been very important for worship at NewSong. This church had the advantage of meeting in varied spaces over a span of thirteen years.¹¹ Necessity *is* the mother of invention and leaders at NewSong had to reinvent the look and feel of their worship space on a regular basis. In 1992, the move to a Gymnasium allowed extensive spacial creativity. The church purchased multiple, interlocking stages that could be connected in numerous configurations and set at varied heights; and they were! Church attendees during that era often spoke of the great expectation the varied worship space created for them from week to week. In 1999, this flexibility was lost as the church moved into a permanent facility. Aside from using space to create expectant worshipers, we also wrestled through what our stage arrangements “said”. We learned that everything from the height of the stages to their distance from the people communicates something about our worship and about our God.

Motivated by Music

Music has played a dominant role in worship at NewSong since its inception.¹² This is in part due to the influence of the founding pastor, Dieter Zander, who initially was the primary musical worship leader in addition to being the primary communicator of the spoken Word. In the fashion of the *Praise and Worship* genre, thirty to forty minutes were always allowed for musical preparation and response. Originally, the bulk of the music was *up front*, with one song at the end of the service. Today, there is great freedom as to where in the service the music is performed. The music load shifts based on the communication need. Heavier topics like

¹¹ The set-up and teardown crews did not always think of this as an “advantage.”

¹² White mentions Frontier worship’s “great emphasis on music” in his book. James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 164.

repentance need more music at the end for response. A topic that is strongly exhortive might require more heart preparation, and so involve a longer set at the beginning.

Original music has been incorporated in worship since 1991 and a number of songwriters within the congregation have contributed to this growing repertoire. This practice has been validated and cultivated because new hymns are seen to be contextual communicators of theology. Personally, I am partial to theology communicated via congregational songs. A well-conceived text married to an emotionally charged melody can deeply implant ideas about God within a person's heart and mind.¹³

Use of the rich hymnody of the Church was at first shirked by me and other leaders at NewSong. Soon, however, we came to realize the depth that singing with past saints can bring to a large worship gathering. In 1992, we began contemporizing one Easter hymn and teaching it on the weeks leading up to Easter. We added a new "old" hymn to our repertoire each year and soon other hymns were rearranged and added sporadically. Now, there are about twenty hymns in regular rotation in this "rock band" oriented church.

Solos or "Special Musics" as they have grown to be called, have been used since the first Christmas Musical presentation in 1989 when five solos were performed around the Christmas theme. As NewSong has transitioned away from a seeker-oriented church, less emphasis has been placed on these types of non-participatory songs. I believe that while gathered, we ought to take advantage of the one thing we cannot do while apart. That is, sing together! Still, when fitting, these types of songs are used.

¹³ This is linked to the *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* concept.

A Sacred “Practice”

In typical Baptist fashion, there are only two sacraments or “practices” as they are called at NewSong: *Communion* and *Baptism*. Communion has had the most interesting evolutionary journey. It is celebrated monthly. For several years, the “crackers and juice” communion was passed out to worshipers and taken as led by the presiding pastor. Usually four songs were programmed for the distribution and taking of these elements. One song introduced communion. A second song allowed for the passing of the bread, which was taken together after the song finished. A third song allowed the passing of the cup, which was similarly taken after the song was over. A final song was used as a response and was typically more celebratory than the previous songs.

Just as NewSong has freely experimented with other traditional forms, communion has been innovated over the years, both in form and theology. Whereas its form had been small plastic cups and tiny crackers passed to the congregation, now it often involves loaves of bread, pitchers of juice with larger cups, and a distribution style that invites people to rise from their seats to “come to the table” as they sing together. We have made this adjustment to bring more of the “feast” back into this ritual. Theologically speaking, communion has gone from a pure Zwinglian symbol to an event with slightly more mystery. While *Transubstantiation* and *Consubstantiation* are not acknowledged, it is believed that something deeply meaningful and mysterious involving God’s presence occurs when the bread and cup are shared. This retrieval of “mystery” has refreshed our communion practice. I have the additional desire that in years to come, our communion will become less somber and more eschatological in feel and practice.

CONCLUSION

According to Lester Ruth's new taxonomy for churches, NewSong is a *Personal-story* church that perhaps is awakening to its need to become more *Cosmic*. Secondly, NewSong is structured primarily around its *Music* and next around the *Word*. Finally, using Ruth's categories, NewSong is *Congregational* as it functions independently from denominational resources.¹⁴

My involvement in the Worship History and Theology course has confirmed and clarified the liturgical decisions mentioned above. Also, a greater understanding of the history and theology of liturgy in the Church has given me assurance that NewSong is one Baptist congregation that has benefited from elements that have been incorporated from beyond its own tradition. The worship habits practiced within the walls of NewSong have disciplined many. However, there is still one area of great challenge for NewSong. It is the task of moving from an *attractional* church model to a more *missional* model. This relates to our discussion of ethics and how liturgy can affect social action beyond a church's four walls.

In 2003, NewSong developed a new mission statement, which is to "Risk everything for Christ." Unfortunately, the structure and history of NewSong are proving to be insurmountable for a true "risk" in the area of "liturgy beyond the Liturgy." While there has always been NewSong's "homeless" food ministry in Pomona and variously organized outreaches to the community, we have yet to take a significant "risk" in terms of true external missionality. What do I mean by "significant risk"? Alan Jacobs in a recent article for *Books and Culture* shares his idea of what this kind of risk might look like:

¹⁴ Lester Ruth, "A Rose by Any Other Name", in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen*, Todd E. Johnson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 46-51.

Given all the thousands of American churches that have enjoyed the great satisfaction of moving from a high-school cafeteria or a storefront to a beautiful new building, wouldn't it be wonderful if just a few reversed that course? That is, if a congregation gave their building away so that it could house a Christian service agency (or indeed another, poorer church), and then found a nice gymnasium somewhere to meet on Sunday mornings?¹⁵

While some might call this “reckless” and a “failure to meet the standards of ‘good stewardship’”, others might call it “risk” in the name of a radical, social agenda on behalf of Jesus and his kingdom.¹⁶ Is this what NewSong needs? Only God knows, and only this local body can choose to find out. I am pulling for something along these lines to usher in the next phase of liturgical development for this church.

¹⁵ Alan Jacobs, “Choose Life”, in *Books and Culture*, Vol.12 No.2 Mar/Apr 06, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International), 8.

¹⁶ Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clapp, Rodney. *A Peculiar People*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

Jacobs, Alan. "Choose Life." in *Books and Culture*. Vol 12 No 2 Mar/Apr 06. Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International.

Pascal, Blaise. *Pensees*. trans. by A.J. Krailsheimer. London: Penguin Books, 1966.

Ruth, Lester. "A Rose by Any Other Name." in *The Conviction of Things Not Seen*. Todd E. Johnson, ed. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002.

Stubbs, David L. "Ending of Worship: Ethics." in *A More Profound Alleluia*. Leanne Van Dyk, ed. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

White, James F. *Introduction to Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

Witvliet, John D. *Worship Seeking Understanding*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.