

The Depth Dynamic of Christian Worship: A Trinitarian Perspective

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We live in a time when questions about Christian worship abound, not only in church circles, but in the secular press. A feature article in the *Indianapolis Star* observes: "Churches and synagogues across the country are in the midst of a worship war--a battle between deep religious traditions and a secular world influenced by a rapidly changing popular culture."¹

Some congregations seek to avoid casualties from these battles by dividing into separate "tribes."² So there may be a "contemporary" service Saturday night, a "traditional" service Sunday at nine, and a "blended" service Sunday at eleven. Frequently there is deep mistrust between the advocates of each type of service.

"They don't care about our heritage at all," says one; "all *they* want is to be entertained." At the same time someone else is saying, "*they* don't care about the unchurched; all they want is to keep doing things the same old boring way." A third participant, wanting to keep peace and avoid the tribal splits, pleads that "if we'd all just give a little and do something each group likes, we could learn to get along." Even the terminology is misleading, since "traditional" tends to mean "how they did it fifty years ago" and "contemporary" means "what was contemporary when I was a young adult."

Such discussions rarely raise the underlying question: What is Christian worship? What is it trying to do? Scholars in liturgical studies attempt to answer those questions in a variety of ways. We may study the history of worship, seek to discover its psychological effects, analyze its sociological configurations or anthropological patterns, observe how it functions in the life of a congregation, or focus on the needs of gen-x'ers or the millennial generation.

I want to propose an alternative methodology. It recognizes the event nature of Christian public worship as a participation in ritual. The word "ritual" is out of favor in many Protestant congregations. It seems to be a synonym for empty, meaningless, boring. At the same time, the popular culture, whether in music, sport, or business recognizes the power of ritual and consciously uses it to effect the consumer.

¹ Judith Cebula, staff writer, "Working on Worship," Saturday, January 13, 2001, p. F-1.

² Thomas Troeger and Carol Doran, *Trouble at the Table* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992)

Meanwhile, the ritual despisers are not only effected by secular rituals but proceed to construct their own rituals for contemporary or blended services. We ignore the power and pervasiveness of ritual at our peril.

Ritual events are “thick” with meaning. In them, what we see and hear and do have significance beyond the immediately observable. That significance involves cognitive reflection, but it also forms and expresses feeling, relationships, and the patterning of behavior, both corporately and individually. As Nathan Mitchell puts it, ritual intends to produce a “body (both personal and corporate) which knows how, liturgically, to ‘do’ a redeemed world.”³

I come from a tradition which uses the word “worship” much more frequently than the word “liturgy.” I have found it helpful to identify a distinction between worship and liturgy.⁴ As I use the words, worship can be public or private while liturgy is always corporate. Worship can use ritual but it doesn’t have to, whereas liturgy is by nature a ritual act. When Christians come together for corporate worship and do so according to a pattern that persists from week to week, they are doing liturgy. Christian public worship, as I have encountered it, is liturgical act.

The methodology I propose is to look beneath Christian public worship as a ritual act on the one hand, and worship as personal and communal religious experience on the other, to discover the theological depth dynamic underlying it. That is, beneath questions of style, rubrics, text, and symbolic action in liturgical studies are theological dynamics that lie deep in the practice of Christian public worship both in its historic and contemporary manifestations. They are “deep” because they are beneath what we see and hear and read, although their presence is manifested there. They are “dynamic” because they are vital and interactive. They don’t “stay put” but manifest an interactive energy in which no one facet can be understood apart from another.

When one looks at liturgical worship in this way, there is a temptation to see only what I already know, rather than seeking to know what it is I am really discovering. We can no longer pretend that we come as unbiased observers, but we have also learned that some dynamics can be uncovered only by participants who are immersed in what they are seeking to understand. Aware of the possible dangers of such an approach, I recognize that I come to the study of liturgical worship as one for whom involvement in the worship life of the church has been a central part of my life since before I can remember.

³ “Ritual as Reading” in Joanne M. Pierce and Michael Downey, eds., *Source and Summit* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 178.

⁴ Dwight W. Vogel, “Liturgical Theology: A Conceptual Geography,” *Primary Source of Liturgical Theology: A Reader* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000) p. 6.

I grew up in evangelical congregations where revival services and the observance of the Lord's Supper were both important. As a youth, I played gospel piano for weeklong "camp meetings" in Kansas. When Linda and I moved to Boston for graduate school, we discovered (to our surprise) that the church in which we felt most at home was Trinity Episcopal Church on Copley Square. During the folk-song oriented worship "happenings" of the 60's, I was involved in the planning and leadership of weekly worship for undergraduates. During two sabbaticals we worshipped daily with the Benedictine Roman Catholic communities in Collegetown and St. Joseph, Minnesota. I have done music ministry in three very different settings. Currently we worship with an multi-cultural urban congregation with limited financial resources but exciting ministry. The worship life of the seminary has been central to my work here for more than a decade, and earlier this spring we purchased "praise band" instruments and equipment and I am seeking to learn yet another language for public worship in the Church.

I have critiqued each of those settings. I have not been equally comfortable in all of them, nor have they all nourished me in equally important ways. But I am reminded of a story told by a guest speaker when I was a seminary student. Someone asked Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the days of the underground seminary at Finkenwald how he could cope with the variety of levels of ability and perspective manifested in their worship life together. He answered: "There was only one crucial question: 'What is God saying to us, to me in this service?'" In the spirit of Peter Brunner's understanding of *Gottesdienst* I would add these corollary questions: "What are we saying to God and to each other?"⁵

I have to face the fact that, for me, God has indeed been active in all these settings and that, to some degree but in a significant way, they have all been worship. When I put it that way, I am making a theological affirmation. That leads me to seek the depth dynamic of Christian worship not in the psychology of religious experience manifested there, nor in the sociological analysis of the situation, though I hasten to add that we can and must listen to what such studies have to teach us. Rather, the perspective on the depth dynamic I propose is theological in nature.

I want to look at that depth dynamic through the lenses of the Apostolic Blessing found in II Corinthians 13:13: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the koinonia of the Holy Spirit be with you all." The theological dynamic at work in Christian liturgical worship is, I contend, deeply and profoundly trinitarian in nature. Further, I suggest, many of the inadequacies of worship reflect an absence of that trinitarian dynamic in its fullness.

⁵ Peter Brunner speaks of "the service of God" as deliberately ambiguous, implying both the service God renders to us and the service we offer to God, See his book *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1968).

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

One part of that depth dynamic is to be found in "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the gospels and in the liturgy of the Church, I believe that is centered in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Pasch of the early church. There is great wisdom in seeing all the services of our "high holy days" from Holy Thursday evening through the celebration of Easter as part of an on-going service--no blessings and dismissals or postludes, just silence at the end of each service. The tradition of the Church here is that the death and resurrection of Jesus are not two separate events but are closely linked in the experience of the Church. It is as though they are one word: "death-and-resurrection." That is also clear in the Sacraments. Dying and rising is a central theme of the baptismal covenant. And in Services of Word and Table we gather in the presence of the risen Christ to receive "the body of Christ, broken for you."

The death and resurrection of Jesus, however, is like a rock dropped in the center of a pool of water with ripples moving out in all directions. The death of Jesus does not just happen, it is part and parcel of his life and ministry. Understanding all that causes us to reach back to the incarnation to begin to understand how it is that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self" (II Corinthians 5:19). That radical embodiment in human flesh dare not be ignored. Nor can we stop the story with the resurrection, but must recognize that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is bound up with that grace too.

The Christian community of faith places all these events in human history in yet a larger context: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:2). And this affirmation of Christ's participation in creation and oneness with God before creation is balanced by the eschatological hope that sees Christ as not only the Alpha but also as the Omega.

This Christian metanarrative in which we understand our worship has yet one more essential component. All this is to be incorporated into the lives of faithful Christians. It has to do with how we live out our baptism, how we embody eucharistic living, how we live as those who are not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our lives in Christ Jesus (Romans 12:2). Roger Deschner, of blessed memory, spoke of the word "worship" as coming from the German "werden" (to become) and the Old English "scieppan" (akin to Old High German and meaning "shape"). Thus, for him worship was "the shape of what is coming to be."⁶

⁶ Personal notes from Roger Deschner's presentation at the training event for The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989, in Nashville, TN. Father David Fleming, SM, of Rome informs me that this makes philological sense, although I have been unable to verify this "alternative" understanding of the

This is true not only for individual disciples, but also for us as a community of faith. As Augustine wrote:

You are Christ's own body, his members; thus, it is your own mystery which is placed on the Lord's table. It is your own mystery that you receive. For at communion, the priest says 'The body of Christ' and you reply 'Amen!' *When you say 'Amen' you are saying yes to what you are.*⁷

We talk of all this as the "paschal mystery." As Joyce Anne Zimmerman writes: "Whose mystery? Both Christ's and ours, when we live that into which we have been plunged by the waters of baptism."⁸ Christian public worship then is the liturgy--the work of the people--in embodying the mystery of God as Emmanuel--God with us. That is the Christological dimension without which Christian worship cannot be what it truly is.

The love of God

Why is this depth dynamic so important to Christian worship? It is not merely that Jesus is the founder of this particular religion. The paschal mystery points beyond Jesus to "the love of God." There is something more than the human dimension involved. This "love so amazing" is also "love divine."⁹

By its very nature, worship places us before the Transcendent. Our language here tends to reflect the nature of space: we say God is "above" us or "beyond" us, and that we come "before" God when we worship. We are speaking metaphorically, seeking language to point to a Mystery we cannot comprehend, yet a Mystery which grasps us. Our God is an awesome God, and when we do not recognize that, the paschal mystery loses its significance. The paschal mystery is not only about Jesus as a human person who went about doing good. It is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son" (John 3:16). Or, as the writer of Colossians puts it: "He is the image of the invisible God . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:15, 19).

The cherubim cry "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3) and we dare to sing those words with them. Awe is in short supply today. People may seek it in roller coaster thrills, but they are transient and superficial. They may look to media stars, or political and military leaders, but the moral quality

etymology of the word. Whether or not the etymology is accurate, however, I believe the theological affirmation made is sound.

⁷ Sermon 272, italics mine.

⁸ "Paschal Mystery--Whose Mystery? A Post-Critical Methodological Reinterpretation," in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, p. 312.

⁹ Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (1707), excerpt from stanza 4.

behind the window dressing is disillusioning. Closer to what we are seeking may be our experience of a majestic mountain or the howling of a great storm. But as Elijah discovered at Horeb, even here awe stops short of the holy.¹⁰

God is not God if God is not great. Awe and mystery and a sense of the holy are not feelings we have to manufacture if we are to worship. Rather, to recognize that we are in the presence of the Transcendent One cannot help but engender such feelings. It is not that we create an awesome God by creating an aura of holiness. God is holy. When we are unaware of that fact, God does not stop being holy. It is only that we live without an awareness of Who is present.

When Mother Teresa would appear in an airport lobby and people recognized her, the whole room would often go silent. Perhaps, over in one corner, some people were so absorbed in their own activities that they didn't notice. In the presence of greatness, they were absorbed in the mundane. To a much more significant extent, that can happen in services of worship. We are in the presence of God but because we don't know it, we act as though it's just busy-ness as usual.

Awe, mystery, and a sense of the holy are depth dynamics for worship, but for Christians they do not lead only to a sense of the "Otherness" of God--though that dimension must be present. This awe and sense of holiness is deepened because it is not the distance or the power of God that overwhelms us. Rather it is that we are "convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

If that recognition does not bring us to an experience of awe and mystery, we have sold our birthright for a mess of pottage, and settled for cheap grace---cheap not because it is worth less, but because we are unaware of the treasure we are receiving. How many priceless pieces of art have been thrown out with the trash because people have no idea what they have in their hands. It happens in worship too.

The Koinonia of the Holy Spirit

The depth dynamics of worship, then, have to do with both the Transcendence and the Immanence of God. The Apostolic Blessing points us to one more essential dimension which must be present: "the koinonia of the Holy Spirit." Translating the Greek word "koinonia" is a challenge I try to avoid. Neither "communion" nor "community" is adequate. "Sharing" is a better alternative, but it is unclear what is being shared and by whom. Koinonia lets all those possibilities be wonderfully fuzzy and thus the rich

¹⁰ I Kings 19:11-12.

multivaliancy of the word is available to us, and the common denominator is relationality. The Holy Spirit relates us to each other and the Holy Spirit relates us to God. Both are essential to the depth dynamic of Christian worship.

When Roger Deschner talked about worship as “the shape of what is coming to be” he noted the significance of saying “that was very moving” or “I was moved by that.”¹¹ Granted that one could only be saying “I really liked that,” it usually points to the recognition that we have been changed--we are no longer where we were, we are at a new place. This transformation or new life in Christ or new creation is an important dynamic in Christian worship. We do not move ourselves. So in profound worship, we speak of “being moved.”

In worship, we understand this to be the work of the Holy Spirit. “Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it” we pray at Services of the Baptismal Covenant.¹² Or in the Service of Word and Table: “Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here and on these gifts of bread and wine.”¹³ The Holy Spirit is active in blessing both what comes from nature (water, bread, wine) and people. The divisions between sacred and secular and between people who don’t understand one another are put into a new perspective. How can we love God whom we have not seen if we cannot accept brothers and sisters we can see?

Furthermore, we receive gifts of the Spirit. In I Corinthians 12 through 14, we learn that these gifts are not for our personal enjoyment; they are given for the sake of the community. No one has all the gifts; we need one another. And the less noticeable gifts are no less valuable. All of which has significant implications for worship.

Nor can we forget the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22). Worship does not stop when the service ends. Indeed the service does not end. At St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Dubuque, Iowa, there is a sign over the door as you leave: “Servants Entrance.”

Thus, the Holy Spirit empowers us to be in relationship with God, with each other, and to the world. Without relationality, our experience of the Transcendence and Immanence of God becomes escapist.

Trinitarian Depth Dynamics

¹¹ Personal notes from Roger Deschner’s presentation at the training event for The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989, in Nashville, TN.

¹² “The Baptismal Covenant I” in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 36.

¹³ “A Service of Word and Table I” in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 10.

These then are some of the theological depth dynamics in Christian liturgical worship as we seek to answer the questions: "What is worship? What is God saying to us in worship? What are we saying to God and to each other?"

1. In worship, the community of faith embodies the paschal mystery centered in Jesus Christ.
2. In worship, the community of faith becomes aware of the presence the Holy.
3. In worship, the Holy Spirit empowers us to be in relationship with God, each other and the world.

It is clear from my own experience, and quite likely from yours as well, that quite often something goes wrong with these depth dynamics. While it is difficult from what is on the surface to know what is wrong, we sense that this service is out of touch with its roots, that somehow it is malnourished. I want to distinguish that from matters of personal preference. It is more than not liking a particular style of music, or being either bored or assaulted by the presider's style, offended or pleased by the language used, inspired or affronted by the ritual actions employed. What we are concerned with is the depth dynamic beneath all these words and actions, with the vital theological activity which they express and form.

We want to avoid a Docetism in which the Word does not become flesh, an Ebionitism in which transcendence and immanence never meet, as well as a Donatism in which purity of life becomes more central than the grace of God. I am convinced that beneath our disagreements about style and language and gesture and signs are theological dynamics. When they are out of balance, no amount of tinkering with the more obvious forms of expression will "fix things up." Our evangelical commitment will be superficial and our prophetic action in a hurting world malnourished.

When these theological depth dynamics are balanced and interrelated, things can "go wrong" on the surface, but the deep underlying currents will carry us through. Liturgical worship is "the shape of what is coming to be."¹⁴ For "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the koinonia of the Holy Spirit" are source and summit of our worship and work together--our liturgy--as the people of God.¹⁵

¹⁴ See footnote 6 above.

¹⁵ Even as the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* speaks of the liturgy as the source and summit of the Church's life, so we speak of these trinitarian dynamics as source and summit of the liturgy.