

Freedom and Framework, Spirit and Truth: Recovering Biblical Worship

(Originally published in *Studia Liturgica* 2002, 32, 176-95. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

by

N. T. Wright*

I. Introduction

“Biblical worship” is a huge topic, and one on which I am not really qualified. I am neither a liturgist, nor a liturgiologist. I am simply a New Testament scholar working in a community whose daily life is structured around public and corporate worship, two or three times every day and three or four on Sundays; in the course of which I reflect from time to time on what we are doing, how it might be improved, and so forth. I also visit various churches with rather different styles from time to time, and ask myself the same questions. This no more qualifies me to speak on technical aspects of liturgy than eating three meals a day qualifies me to speak on cooking. I come with the eye of a participant rather than a theorist.

I will not try to defend myself against the charge that I am reading an Anglican view back into the Bible, though I am critical of my own traditions in many places. Anglicans pride themselves on balance. However, in talking about worship, as with everything in theology, in a single lecture it is impossible to make the necessary balance explicit all the time. Some of what I say will properly need an “on the other hand” clause, for which there will be no space. I hope this will be read in a spirit of hermeneutical generosity and trust rather than suspicion.

One of my minor qualifications for writing on this topic is that I have spent a good part of my life in college chaplaincy (or “campus ministry” as it is called in the United States), during which I have frequently met two characters, whom I will collect together into two fictional but true-to-life students. Jack came from a free-church background, where he had had Bible and choruses coming out of his ears since he was old enough to remember. He had long since ceased to be surprised by the gospel, or excited by worship. Suddenly he found himself in a liturgical setting where a drama unfolded and caught him up in a quite new way

within the powerful world of sacramental practice. Jill, meanwhile, had been brought up in a “high” church where the liturgy was beautifully performed, but over-fussy. Everything had to be just so. There seemed no chance of new life breaking in or out. Suddenly she fell in with a group who met to pray spontaneously, to break into song whenever they wanted to, to share each other’s spiritual journeys. It was like a whole new wonderful world.

I have had the challenge of ministering to and with the Jacks and Jills, trying to make sense of the fact that one person’s life-giving experience is another person’s boring old tradition. I have myself enjoyed both formal and informal worship for many years, and have also been frustrated when either mode, or any in between, become dry and forget what they are really about. I suspect that this experience is not unique. So to our task. Out of the myriad possibilities for a wide-ranging paper like this, I shall pick three New Testament strands — one a shortish passage, one a whole book, one a theme that straddles several books — and draw out from them certain points which seem to me central and vital. Second, I shall highlight three principles which emerge and which deserve fuller consideration. Third, I shall draw attention to three areas of current practice which need urgent attention.

II. Three New Testament Frameworks

1. Revelation 4 and 5

I begin with the spectacular scene in the book of Revelation, chapters 4 and 5, where John the Seer is summoned to become for a while a spectator at the heavenly court, watching as the whole creation pours out its ceaseless praise before its creator. This is not a vision of the ultimate future — that comes in chapters 21 and 22 — but of the heavenly dimension of *present* reality. When John is told that he will be shown “what must take place after this” (4:1), this does not mean that chapters 4 and 5 themselves are a vision of the future; they are a vision of the throne room, where ceaseless worship is made, within which the vision of the future is to be vouchsafed to the seer as the sealed scroll (5:1) is gradually unsealed.^[1] It seems in 4:1-2 that “coming up to heaven” and “being in the Spirit” are functionally equivalent; heaven and earth are the interlocking spheres of God’s single creation, and when John is “in the spirit,” he is suddenly open to and aware of the heavenly

dimension of what we call ordinary life.[2]

The scene laid out before him begins with a description of the heavenly throne-room itself, rather like the one in Ezekiel 1. God himself is not described, but a sense of his presence and majesty fills the whole passage. We are not surprised when the first thing that happens is worship; though we are perhaps surprised that the beginning of worship is that of the animal, rather than the human, creation. The four living creatures, the lion, the ox, the one with a human face, and the eagle, six-winged like the seraphim in Isaiah 6, praise God ceaselessly with the Trisagion: Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come. Then, in the context of this praise from all creation, the twenty-four elders, representing the people of God from old covenant and new, fall down and declare that God is worthy of this worship, because he is the powerful creator of all. The English word “worship” comes from the word “worthy,” and here is one of its classic expressions: “worship” means acknowledging the worth, the worthiness, of the one who is worshiped. It means gladly recognizing and celebrating the fact that this God is who he is and does what he does.

Already two fundamental points emerge. First, biblical worship is grounded in the fact that God is the creator of all. Any attempt to slide off into a dualism in which creation is secondary, shabby or evil is ruled out. Second, the task of humans is to bring to conscious thought and expression the worship of the rest of creation. Heaven and earth are full of God’s glory, but God’s image-bearing creatures, we humans, are called to know that it is so and to put it into words of praise. That is what you do every time you say “hallowed be thy name” or “glory be to God on high.”

All this, of course, takes us back to Genesis 1. God saw what he had made and declared it good; after the creation of man and woman, he declared it “very good.” But Genesis 1 was a project, not a fixed tableau; and the project misfired. In Revelation 5 we see that God is holding a scroll, the scroll which contains, we understand, God’s sovereign purpose for the world; but the scroll requires someone to open it, and John weeps because nobody can do so. More specifically, it requires a *human being* to open it, and no human being is worthy to

do so. But then we look, and see the lion who is also the lamb; the Messiah, the Root of David, who has conquered because he is also the lamb who was slaughtered, and who now sends God's sevenfold spirit into all the world. He is the one who can now take forward God's project, not just for human beings but for all creation.

The result is a new outburst of praise. The song of creation is taken up into the song of redemption, and this time there is instrumental music, incense, prayer, and singing: because this is the new song, the song of new creation, the song which opens up the new world of possibility for worship. This is the song which celebrates the Messiah's saving death and resurrection, and its result in creating humans as kings and priests to bring God's wise order to the world. When the four living creatures reply "Amen!" at the end of the song, we find ourselves back where we were at the start. Creation worships God the creator, and humans bring that worship into conscious articulation; humans worship God the redeemer, and creation utters a glad "Amen."

A few reflections before moving on. We note the integration of heaven and earth, and of creation and humans, in this worship. We note that the purpose of God is not to save humans *from* the world but to save them *for* the world, to enable them to be his kings and priests ruling and redeeming creation. The old caricature of "heaven" as a boring place with nothing to do but play harps arises from a misreading of this whole book. Already in this scene, but more fully at the end of Revelation, God's people are not just worshipers but also workers, bringing God's new creation into reality.

We must note too, something we easily forget, the inescapable political dimension of all this.^[3] Worshiping the creator and redeemer as the sovereign one who rules, and who makes his people kings and priests, was and is fighting talk in the world of Caesar's empire. Just as the Jewish daily prayers, particularly the Eighteen Benedictions, were full of talk about God putting down the powerful and raising up the lowly, because he was the God of creation and redemption, so the book of Revelation continually celebrates God's sovereignty in a way which makes it very clear that Caesar is not sovereign and is called to account. Towering over all this is the fact that creation and humankind is worshipping *God and the Lamb together*.^[4] Within a setting which is

obviously drawn from, and loyal to, the whole Jewish and Old Testament tradition of fierce monotheism over against dualism and paganism alike. Revelation insists on putting Jesus alongside the creator as the proper object of worship. And as the book of Revelation goes on its way towards its final great climax, again and again we listen in on more worship, more singing, more celebration, in which all these points are highlighted: creation and church together celebrating the victory of God and the lamb over the forces of evil, of darkness, of deceit, and of destruction. The sovereignty of God in the New Testament is more about politics than about philosophy. And, at the end (chapters 21-22), the vision is not of humans escaping from this world and going off to heaven, but of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth.[5] Christian worship as outlined here is all about telling the story of what God has done, is doing, and will do. Like the great psalms and songs of the Old Testament, it celebrates God's mighty deeds, and, by the sheer fact of doing so, helps forward the next stage of God's purpose.

2. Romans

My next "passage" consists of the entire letter to the Romans.[6] It is of course impossible to do more than scratch the surface, but perhaps by doing so I may stimulate you to go back and read that wonderful, inexhaustible book with new eyes. Paul declares right from the start (1:5) that the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the nations: and this "obedience of faith," when we analyze it closely, is a way of summing up the Jewish response to God, "Hear, O Israel, YHWH our God, YHWH is one." [7] This is, for Paul, the true fulfillment of the Law itself: that people from every nation should come to worship and love the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That this is what Romans is at one level all about is clear if we look across to the conclusion of the theological exposition, in 15:7-13: the Gentiles come in to join Israel in praising the one God, because the root of Jesse has been raised from the dead. Paul is here on the same page as Revelation 4 and 5.

But how does he get from chapter 1 to chapter 15? As always in Jewish tradition, true *worship* and the truly human life it sustains are set

in antithesis to the idolatry and human dissolution of paganism. The fundamental problem with the human race, according to Romans 1-3, is not sin, but idolatry: a failure of worship, which leads to, but is itself deeper than, the multiple failures of human living. Thus we should not be surprised when Paul, explaining what God has done to address this situation, highlights, as does Revelation, the faithfulness of the Messiah, Jesus, in his sacrificial death (3:21-26). Then, looking to the appropriate response, he explains that Abraham's faith was in fact the true worship, celebrating God's power as the creator, giving life to the dead and calling nonexistent things into existence (4:18-25). Not surprisingly, again as in Revelation, those who worship God like this become fruitful, taking forward God's purposes, as opposed to the idolatry which renders humankind fruitless and ultimately lifeless. Then in Romans 5-8 — this is not normally noticed, but it is a powerful and vital theme — Paul tells the story of the Exodus, only now the new Exodus in Christ.^[8] God's people come through the waters of baptism (chapter 6), the waters which make the slaves free; they come to Mount Sinai (chapter 7), but find that the Law is incapable of giving the life it promised; but then, as in Revelation 5, they discover that the Messiah has done what the Law could not do, and now in Romans 8 they are on their way to the inheritance; not now a piece of geographical territory, and certainly not a future life in a disembodied "heaven," but the entire renewed creation in which Paul, like Revelation, declares that they will "reign" (5:17). Through their renewal and resurrection, creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay (8:18-25). And at the moment, as they worship God, calling him Abba, father, they find the Spirit groaning within them in their life of prayer, caught between creation and new creation, between present death and the promise of life (8:26-27). They find that they are thereby conformed to the image of God's son (8:29), the firstborn of the family. Here we find becoming explicit what was implicit in Revelation's evocation of Genesis 1: the purpose of the human race is to be God's image-bearers, reflecting his image into the rest of the world; and in Christ, as Paul says here and in Colossians 3:10, this is at last achieved. This is indeed the very heart of worship: that we should gaze in love and gratitude at our creator and redeemer, and so be restored as genuine human beings and thereby be

God's agents for the healing of creation.

This enables Paul to open up his own deepest groaning in prayer as he wrestles with the condition of Israel according to the flesh, and with the strange purposes, fulfilled now in the Messiah, through which Gentiles are coming in, making Jews jealous, and so saving "all Israel." Indeed, Paul's tears, and their resolution in the Messiah, remind us here of John's in Revelation 5. And once again all concludes, at the end of chapter 11, in solemn but ecstatic praise (and if you think solemnity and ecstasy are antithetical, read Paul and think again) to God the wise and powerful creator and redeemer.

This brings us to another of the New Testament's central statements about worship: Romans 12:1-2. By the mercies of God, he says, present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God; this is your true worship, the worship in which your whole humanness becomes its true self. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you can judge for yourselves what God's will is, what is good, and well-pleasing, and perfect. Body and mind are to work together: again, no smell of dualism here. And, with grace and mercy as the bedrock of it all, we are to explore, in presenting our bodies as the true act of worship, what it means to be "well-pleasing" to God. Heirs of the Reformation (including the present writer) are so drilled in justification by faith, which is of course one of the fundamental teachings of this letter, that we easily forget that when Paul comes to worship and obedience he delights, here and elsewhere, in declaring that what we do in Christ, on the basis of God's mercy, is pleasing to God. This is not taking away one jot or tittle from justification by faith; here in Romans itself it is that to which justification by faith leads you. Fear of Pelagianism and Arminianism in their various forms, allied perhaps with various psychological pressures, has led us to neglect this vital element in Paul, but it is foundational to his ethics and his worship. For Paul, to draw back from "pleasing God" does not mean humility or reverence, but a failure in obedience; and it probably means, as well, that we are either pleasing ourselves or perhaps pleasing other people — perhaps, even, that we are pleasing the Empire.

In Romans 12-15 Paul explores from many angles what it means to be

the renewed people of God within the pagan world. We should not let Romans 13 put us off from seeing the deeply subversive nature of this claim, echoing similar subversive material earlier in the letter. A single community formed across the barriers of culture and race, giving allegiance to the one Lord and looking for his coming true judgment — this is an agenda that ought to make Caesar shiver in his shoes. And the end of it all, as we saw, is 15:7-13: the Messiah rises to rule the nations, and in him the nations shall hope. The renewed community therefore joins, across all barriers, in praising the one God made known in this Messiah. The closing doxology at the end of chapter 16 picks up these themes once more and celebrates them, giving glory to God and the Messiah. To read Romans as a book primarily about worship is to see it in a new and revealing light.

3. The New Passover

This brings me to my third biblical foundation, which is the theme that runs prominently throughout the New Testament: the new Passover, the new Exodus. In Revelation 15 they sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb. In Luke's gospel Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus on the mountain about his Exodus which he will accomplish in Jerusalem;^[9] and the Exodus motif is woven into all four gospels in multiple overlapping and interlocking ways. I begin with one remarkable passage and move to consider the wider theme which opens up. Ephesians 1:3-14 is rooted in the Jewish tradition of worship ("Blessed be the God who ..."), and tells the story of what God has done in creation, in Christ, and by the Spirit, in language borrowed from Exodus and Deuteronomy. God has chosen his people despite their unworthiness; he has "redeemed" them (an Exodus term, of course) by sheer overflowing grace; he is now leading them to the inheritance which is guaranteed for them. This is also a Trinity story: all is in Christ, all is accomplished by God's spirit. If this is what early Christian worship was like, it was already remarkably rich, with its fresh and dense theology firmly rooted in Jewish soil.

But the passage is not simply a glorious contemplation of God's creative and redemptive grace. It continues with the prayer that we may know God and his power (1:15-23). It continues in chapter 2 by explaining that God's redeeming of Jew and Gentile alike from helpless sin leads

now to the creation of a single new humanity in Christ, a new Temple to be the place of renewed worship. Then in chapter 3 it emerges once again that the creation of this united worshipping community is a sign to the principalities and powers of the world that their time is up, that God is God and that they are not (3:10).

Looking wider than Ephesians, we may consider the centrality of Passover-reflection in early Christianity, and the way in which this decisively and permanently shaped Christian worship. Jesus himself, it appears, chose Passover as the moment to accomplish his own “exodus,” his own act of new-covenant faithfulness, the act in which he loved us to the end, to the uttermost (John 13:1). All four gospels tell the story of this Passover in such a way as to lead our eyes up to it in awe and worship; the gospel traditions themselves are shaped, and their weaving together by the evangelists are shaped, in a multitude of patterns which all declare that this Passover was the weekend that changed the world, the center point of history.

We should not be surprised, then, that Passover imagery permeates Christian worship from the beginning. The Lord’s Prayer is itself full of it, from calling God Father, to asking for bread, to praying against being led into the ultimate test.^[10] But, in particular, baptism and eucharist are from the start Passover-events, Exodus-events. John’s baptism, the foundation of Christian baptism, was not simply a special kind of ritual washing away of sin: it was an eschatological sign, the sign that the true crossing of the Red Sea and Jordan river was at last taking place.

Christian baptism, as we saw in Romans 6 and could note in Colossians 2 and elsewhere, was not a ritual designed to earn God’s favor, but the effective sign of joining the community of God’s renewed people. It was all about forgiveness of sins, the long-awaited blessing promised by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

So too, of course, was the Last Supper, which became foundational for the eucharist. This is my blood of the new covenant, said Jesus, shed for you and for many *for the forgiveness of sins*. The eucharist is (among other things) a transformed Passover meal, rooted in the theology which we find in Revelation and Romans, expressed in characteristically Jewish terms through a simple but unfathomably deep action of taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing bread (that sequence

deserves pondering in the light of the theology of redemption we have examined so far) and giving focus to a community worshipping the one God and the Messiah Jesus and standing as a community against the powers of the world, of death and hell themselves. Think of the Emmaus Road scene in Luke 24, and of how the breaking of bread reveals the risen Lord, resulting in joy and witness. Think, too, of 1 Cor 11:26, where Paul says that as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you announce the death of the Lord until he comes. He doesn't say that the meal gives you an opportunity for preaching; he says that *doing* it is itself a *declaring* of it. Just as some kinds of speech are themselves actions, so some kinds of actions are themselves speech—a handshake, a kiss, the cutting of a ribbon. This action announces to the world, to the principalities and powers, to the worshipping community itself, that the creator god is God, that Jesus is Lord, and that in his death and resurrection he has won the Passover victory which will be fulfilled and consummated in the new creation.

I shall return to this under one of my subsequent headings. I hope I have said enough, in this first and longest part of the paper, to encourage a fresh reading of the New Testament with three things in mind:

- a) that the worship of the very earliest Christians grew directly from their conviction that in his death and resurrection Jesus the Messiah had accomplished the redemption for which Passover was the model and of which the new creation would be the goal;
- b) that in this worship they put Jesus side by side with the creator God, while retaining a constant Jewish emphasis on monotheism over against pagan polytheism, not least the imperial ideology, and dualism;
- c) that in this worship they believed themselves, through thus worshipping the one true God, to be being themselves renewed as human beings, bearing God's image.

All of this is foundational for the more general points I now want to make.

III. Three Energizing and Stabilizing Principles

In the second part of this paper I shall articulate three energizing and stabilizing principles which emerge from this context: the trinitarian object and shape of Christian worship; the nature of worship as

response, but equally as a God-pleasing response; and the integration of humanness that worship generates and sustains.

1. Trinitarian Object and Shape

First, Christian worship is, as we have seen, focused on God himself, the creator; but, from very early indeed, it is also worship of the Lamb, the Messiah, the Lord, the risen Jesus. Interestingly in Revelation, the Spirit, though often spoken of, is usually thought of not as a person in distinction from the worshiping Christians, but as the one who enables their worship. Equally, in Paul, the Spirit, though sovereign and life-giving, is just as often spoken of as being active within Christians, calling forth worship of the Father through the Son (e.g., Rom 8:26-27; Gal 4:6-7). Again, in John's gospel the Spirit is the one through whose work, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, rivers of living water flow from the hearts of believers, enabling them to be God's agents in going to the world with God's love (John 7:37-39).

This offers a distinctively Christian theology both of worship and of prayer. Christian worship stands firmly within the Jewish tradition, but claims by its very nature to be the new-covenant version of it. It stands over against the paganism which invokes, or seeks to placate, various deities involved with this or that aspect of life; why deal with lesser functionaries when you have personal access to the king himself? It also, of course, stands over against all attempts, through pantheism or nature-mysticism, to worship part or all of creation as though it were itself divine. It also rejects all esoteric spiritualities that seek to escape the created order and discover a fulfillment in a different sphere. At this point, frankly, several streams of would-be Christian spirituality stand under judgment. But I want to point out in particular that just as all knowing is defined at least in part in relation to its object, so worship, as a mode of knowing and/or being known, is defined by its object: the God whom we worship. Father, Son, and Spirit, is himself in his threefold unity the means and the pattern of our worship. This is one of the most striking points at which huge theological leaps forward were taken within an extremely short time in the middle of the first century. One result is the sense that Christian worship takes place, as in Revelation, both in heaven and on earth. We worship in the Spirit, and as we do so we are taking our place amongst the angels and archangels

and all the company of heaven. At this point I must pay tribute to John Calvin's eucharistic theology, which like that of the eastern orthodox churches insists that the real action is taking place in heaven and that we, so far from bringing that magically down to earth, are instead caught up to heaven.[11] The *Sursum Corda*, "lift up your hearts," is the sign of what is really going on. Heaven is not a long way away. It is where Jesus and the Spirit are, revealing the Father and drawing us into worship, love, and obedience.

In particular, the trinitarian object and shape of Christian worship means that, if we follow its logic, the true humanity of Jesus Christ is the source, model, and goal of our own becoming truly human. Like Abraham in Romans 4, we are to discover that, in worshiping the powerful creator and life-giving redeemer, we ourselves become more truly human, resulting in our being fruitful in God's service. Or, to put it another way, we are to be renewed in the image of God, knowing him and knowing about him, loving him and serving him with our love, above all reflecting his glory not only back to God himself but, equally importantly, out into the world. Christian worship is designed to be the primary means by which the project of Genesis 1 is taken forward.

One of the primary spiritual laws is that you become like what you worship, and you reflect what you are worshiping not only into different parts of your own life but to the people around you and the world where you live. Thus one of the purposes of Christian worship is that we not only become like the God we see in Jesus Christ, but that we reflect this God in our own lives and to the people and places where we are placed. And this of course means, as many have insisted, that in our worship we are precisely living and acting "in Christ," making real what is true of us through baptism and faith, whereby we become living members of the Jesus Christ who in his perfect manhood offers to the Father that love, obedience, and loyalty which is the true human vocation.[12]

2. The Pleasing Response

This leads to a central and vital area which is often muddled and needs to be sorted out. Christian worship and prayer are always and only a response to God's sovereign grace and mercy; but this response is pleasing to God. This draws out what I said a moment ago about

Romans. Just because we believe in justification by faith, that does not mean we cannot do anything that brings pleasure to God. On the contrary, Paul says again and again both in Romans and elsewhere that our obedience, our love, our holiness, and above all our worship, are pleasing to God, just as the Old Testament writers spoke of God being pleased, or not as the case might be, with sacrifices and offerings. Now at last, Paul declares, we can offer God a pleasing sacrifice, and it consists of the true worship in which body and mind come together in obedience and love.[13]

This challenges head-on the assumption that creeps in again and again to Protestant thinking about worship. It comes with the turf of Protestantism to distance oneself from any attempt, by our religious observances, to put God in our debt. Sometimes this is expressed in terms of old and new covenants, as though Israel before Christ had been supposed to earn God's favor through law-keeping and sacrifices, whereas with Jesus and the Spirit an entirely new system had been launched. This is misleading as an account of the Old Testament itself, and damaging to an understanding of the New Testament. The polemic against the Law in Paul, for instance, is not about the danger of "doing" things to earn God's favor, certainly not about doing what God himself has commanded as the glad obedient response of a people redeemed by sheer grace. An obvious place to start is Deuteronomy, where worship and obedience all spring from gratitude for God's undeserved love — an emphasis which, obviously, comes straight through into the New Testament.

Of course, where people do not understand the gospel, it is always perfectly possible for them to suppose that by going to church, singing hymns, saying prayers, or putting money into the collection they have earned favor with God. This is the risk that the Pauline language of "pleasing God" is bound to run. But Christian worship from the very beginning has attempted, at the level of structure as well as content, to rule this out, to make it clear that such a thing would be a shallow misunderstanding. The main point here is the priority given, in Christian worship, to the Bible.

The Bible is not simply read aloud in order to convey information, to teach doctrine or ethics or history, though of course it does that too. It

is read aloud as the effective sign that all that we do is done as a response to God's living and active word, the word which, as Isaiah says, accomplishes God's purpose in the world, abiding for ever while all flesh withers like the grass. The place of scripture in Christian worship means that both in structure and content God's initiative remains primary, and all that we do remains a matter of response. And, in much liturgy and certainly in my own tradition, the way we prepare to hear God's word and the way we respond to it when it has been read consist almost entirely of other passages of the Bible itself. The regular opening of morning and evening prayer in the Anglican tradition is Ps 51:15, significantly enough from a context of penitence and free forgiveness: O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise. God delights in the praises of his people; but even that praise can only come about by God's own action.

Once this is clear we should be able to address head on the fact that Christian liturgy is itself an act of humility, of response, of obedience. We live in a culture where doing our own thing, breaking with the past and discovering our own identity from within, are urged upon us from all sides. The Christian gospel reveals much of this as a form of gnosticism, of pride, of refusing grace rather than accepting it. And the fact of using a liturgy which is not of our own making, in which God's initiative is built into the very structure, in which we share the wisdom and prayer of previous generations and other cultures, is itself a sign of humility, a sign that we know we are responding to God's grace, not taking the initiative ourselves. Christian liturgy thus declares in structure and content that we are creatures before our creator, sinners before our holy God, the redeemed before our redeemer. It is heavily ironic that in some Protestant circles the absence of official liturgy, and the reliance on what particular people decide to do at any given moment, is not recognized as what it is in *form* (though obviously not necessarily in content): an exercise in cheerful Pelagianism.

In particular, we should be able to avoid the implication, which creeps in from time to time, that physically *doing* things in worship is an incipient form of works-righteousness. Actually, you cannot avoid "doing things." Even if you stay still and silent, that is still choosing to "do something." The most Protestant of churches still have some form

and order to what they “do.” There is nothing in the fact of sacramental action itself which threatens the doctrine of justification by faith. I shall say more about this presently.

3. *Integrated Humanness*

My third basic principle follows from all this: Christian worship ought to bring together the often disjointed aspects of our human life. A further threefold division: Christian worship integrates the whole person, the whole community, and the whole creation.

First, the whole person. Loving God, as the *Shema* insists, with heart, mind, soul, and strength means loving God as integrated human beings.

Each of us, no doubt, is tempted to advance on one of these fronts ahead of the others; growing to maturity means learning how to keep them all in balance. This, again, is where some branches of Protestantism have made mistakes in one direction, just as some parts of Catholicism have made mistakes in others. The danger of gnosticism is never far away from many parts of Protestantism: that is, the danger of a dualism in which the created order, including our own bodies, is regarded as dangerous or second-rate, so that worship must renounce our embodiedness, our belonging within the created world of space, time, and matter, rather than reaffirming and redeeming it.^[14] If we follow the biblical pattern at this point, we will find our way through various pairs of opposites. There are the ugly sisters of formalism and informality, to which I shall return; or the twin evils of control and chaos, with some churches having everything nailed down into place so that the Spirit is effectively locked out, and others — like the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14 — so spontaneous and ill-disciplined as to threaten the gospel by their structure as much as their content. Or, again, the twin evils of ritualism and anti-ritualism, the first perverting the liturgy of response into a magical rite designed to manipulate God, the second throwing out the baby of true liturgy with the bathwater of pagan superstition. Ultimately, being human means, both now and in the age to come (i.e., in the resurrection), being *embodied*. Good liturgy celebrates that embodiedness and takes it seriously. Just because liturgy can be abused there is no reason not to do it, any more than we would forbid marriage just because sex can be abused.

Worship also integrates the whole community. That is Paul’s point in

Romans 15, with Jew and Gentile coming together to worship the one God, fulfilling the central Jewish prayer, YHWH our God, YHWH is one (see 3:27-31). In Galatians 3 Paul echoes the standard synagogue prayer in which the congregation thanks God for being made Jewish, free, and male, by saying that there is now neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no “male and female.”[15] In Christian worship, if it is true Christian worship, all those who name the name of Christ belong together, at the same table, saying the same words. Again, good liturgy is designed to make that happen in reality. Such liturgy ought to be in itself part of the ecumenical endeavor as we put back together the shattered fragments of the body of Christ.[16]

And worship, as we saw in Revelation but also in Romans 8, is designed to unite the whole creation. True worship is not world-denying but world-changing. We proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, heralding him as the Lord of the world, and as we do so, the world becomes a different place. It may not look like it all at once, but that is what worship accomplishes. One day, when God gives us our resurrection bodies and then and thereby gives freedom and new life to the whole creation (Rom 8:18-25), our present acts of faithful responsive worship will be seen as stepping-stones on the way to the final “Amen” from the four beasts. If that is so, we should be looking for signs and ways in which, in the present, we can anticipate that eventual future. The most obvious such ways are in the sacraments and in our political life, in which we are commanded, invited, urged, and encouraged to celebrate the lordship of Jesus Christ over the whole creation, in anticipation of the day when at his name every knee shall bow (Rom 14:11; Phil 2:10).

IV. Three Areas for Urgent Attention

There, then, are the three major principles I draw from the New Testament: that Christian worship is trinitarian in object, shape, motivation, and content; that Christian worship is response, not initiative, and that we should celebrate and enjoy the fact that God is pleased with it; and that Christian worship integrates us as human beings, in ourselves, in our communities, and in the whole creation. This leads to three areas for urgent attention if we are to be obedient in our own day and not simply drift with every prevailing trend.

1. Unmasking the Pressure for Informality

My first point is that we must unmask the present pressure towards informality for what it is. It has virtually nothing to do with the Christian gospel and virtually everything to do with the spirit of the age. This is not of course to say that informal worship in all sorts of contexts is not right, proper, and honoring to God. But when informality becomes the rule it becomes just as dangerous as the wrong sort of formality. Let me tell you what I think has happened.

The Reformers protested, rightly in my view, against the way in which the mediaeval church had turned liturgy, and much else besides, into a quasi-pagan system of magic ritual, which enhanced the power of those who operated it and did little or nothing to let the true gospel shine out. And the Reformers used Paul's attack on the so-called "Judaizers" to make their point — which was always a dangerous thing to do, since Paul's agenda was not the same, though that is a topic for another time.^[17] Since the Reformation, however, three great cultural movements have occurred, none of them owing much directly to the Bible or the gospel, but all of them in various ways providing a new spin for how we hear the Reformers, and hence, alas, Paul, today.

First, the Enlightenment, with its ugly ditch between ideas and facts, the eternal truths of reason and the contingent events of history. The split of religion and real life grows from this, giving the clear impression that what matters in religion is the ideas you have in your head rather than the things that happen, including the things that you do, to and through your body. Luther's antithesis of faith and works suddenly becomes the antithesis between internal faith and external events, allied to the Enlightenment's subtle pressures towards privatization of faith and hence its removal from the public arena — which, as we have seen, constitutes a direct challenge to the New Testament. There is a great deal of Enlightenment rhetoric, hiding under Reformation language, in the church today.

Second, the Romantic movement: what matters now is feeling rather than form, the heart rather than the head or the body. Think of Wordsworth or Coleridge. Of course this plugs right in to the New Testament's language — which is there in Judaism as well, not least in the Scrolls and some of the Rabbis — about the necessity for the heart

to be in tune with God, rather than going through outward form. That goes back at least to Amos and Isaiah, and is reinforced by Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and others.[18] But what the Romantic movement was saying was subtly different from what the New Testament had said: it invited you to look within, to see what feelings you had, and to make them the center of your world, rather than seeing the love of the heart for the true God as the gift of God through gospel, word, and spirit. The trouble with the Romantic movement is that it never took account of Jeremiah's warning, repeated in the New Testament, that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.[19]

Third, the existentialist movements of the twentieth century have taken us back to gnosticism. Each of us has inside ourselves a true self which, though long buried, is now to be discovered and enabled to flourish. This, ironically, is actually a form of Pelagianism: what you need, if you are an existentialist or a gnostic, is not to be confronted by the gospel and redeemed from your present state, but to be helped to discover "who you really are." Huge swathes of our contemporary culture are built on this premise, and churches both liberal and conservative have bought it hook line and sinker. (Perhaps I might add as an aside that one of the great triumphs of the film *The Lord of the Rings* is that it takes precisely the opposite line, urging us to find our true selves by following and staying loyal to the vocation that comes from outside, challenging us to do and be what otherwise we would not have.) But the snare of existentialism is that, as in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, it appears before us wearing the robes of a sixteenth-century Reformer, telling us that all pressures from the outside are "Law," which must be abolished if we are to attain authentic existence.

The Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, and existentialism have all thus used the rhetoric of the Reformation to press their own quite different agendas. And the result is that today in many churches, not least those within evangelical Christianity in its broadest senses, we find in all kinds of ways a complex of agendas which owe everything to these three cuckoos in the nest, especially the last two, almost nothing to the Reformation, and nothing at all to the New Testament. Let it be said loud and clear that there is nothing in set forms of worship which is

of itself opposed to the gospel; that abolishing robes, liturgies, ministerial offices, and the like has nothing to do with getting back to New Testament worship; that spontaneity and lack of preparation, though God can use them powerfully, can just as easily be marks of laziness and captivity to spurious philosophies. Iconography can lead to idolatry; but iconoclasm can easily be a sign of dualism, of an anti-creational emphasis that is actually opposed to the creator God and the redemption of the world in Jesus Christ. We need to think through the cultural and sociological roots of what we do in church, lest we suppose ourselves to be advancing the gospel while instead merely turning the church into a sub-branch of the world.

There is another danger here which I just mention in passing.

Protestantism, in protesting against magic, has often tried to do away with mystery as well. Liturgy of all sorts can often open up the mystery of God and the gospel like nothing else; and sometimes this can reveal and release powerful emotions, doing so within a safe and God-given context. Sometimes those who do their best to subvert liturgy, not least through chopping services about, adding and subtracting bits here and there, do so precisely in order to keep the mystery at bay and thus to hold the emotions in check.

Sometimes when people protest against “bare rituals” which go on without the heart being involved (how do they know that, by the way?), they are in fact criticizing the exact opposite: the God-given ritual of worship through which the heart is precisely involved, with its wounds being exposed to the healing love of God. Within some Protestant circles today there is a rejection both of the sacraments and of spiritual gifts, a rejection which springs, in my judgment, not from a genuine Reformation insight, still less a Pauline one, but rather from the desire to control the emotions, and indeed the congregation, to protect them from the gospel rather than allow them to be exposed to it. We must, then, resist the culture-driven pressures to informality. Informality has its place, but it is not the be-all and end-all, and of itself has nothing specific to do with the gospel.

2. Ordering Worship

This leads to the positive point, that we must take more care in ordering our worship appropriately. New liturgies, growing out of and making

good use of the old ones, are always welcome, but part of the point of liturgy is that it unites us with Christian worshipers across space and time, and indeed unites us as individuals with our earlier selves as children and young adults, and our future selves as in God's good time we grow old as worshipers.

But, more particularly, Christian worship is dramatic, performative, setting out and celebrating God's story with the world; to tamper with it on a whim is a form of arrogant vandalism. The biblical story from Genesis to Revelation is a great drama, a great saga, a play written by the living God and staged in his wonderful creation; and in liturgy, whether sacramental or not, we become for a moment not only spectators of this play but also willing participants in it. It is not our play; it is God's play, and we are not free to rewrite the script. We cannot read the whole Bible in each worship service, but the selections we choose, whether through a lectionary or not, should reflect the larger story and remind us of its full sweep and flow. To recognize this is to see that good liturgy is like riding a bicycle: if you keep stopping to do something else, you will fall off. Many clergy and worship-leaders lack the courage to keep going, to trust that the story will carry people with it. They think they have to keep putting in little bits of their own, as though between every scene in a Shakespeare play the producer was to peep out of the wings and tell the audience what was "really" going on (and perhaps remind them that coffee was available in the foyer between the acts). Anything more designed to kill the drama stone dead it would be hard to imagine. No: worship must embody what it says, and not be ashamed to do so.

From this point of view, what we wear, where we stand, how we move (vesture, posture, and gesture) all matter, not because we are ritualists but because this is God's drama and we can easily get in the way.

When those leading worship stand to one side, this makes the point dramatically; when worship-leaders, including musicians, assemble directly in front of a congregation like a rock group at a concert, this can make exactly the wrong point. There is, no doubt, a sense among many modern worship-leaders that this does not matter; but, precisely because worship is about human integration, it matters very much indeed. What you do with your body says something about what you

are doing with the rest of you. Of course kneeling down, raising your hands in worship, crossing yourself, taking up particular positions, can all become rituals and turn into magic. But to insist on sitting down to pray — the one posture the Bible never mentions in connection with prayer—because kneeling is “ritualistic” is cutting off your nose to spite your face. To insist on a free-flowing succession of worship songs at the whim of one leader is not to strike a blow against ritualism, but to put that leader precisely in the place where the Reformers saw the mediaeval priest, coming between the worshipers and God. Good liturgy preserves us from personality cults whether Catholic or Protestant.

These are just some obvious examples. It would take another paper to explore the area systematically and thoroughly. But I hope the point is made. Careful preparation, awareness of the messages sent out by our body language and posture, sensitivity above all to the biblical drama we are re-enacting—this is what integrates freedom and framework, spirit and truth.

3. Redeeming the Culture

My third urgent point concerns the relationship between worship and culture. The great Christ-and-culture debates of the last century have taught us that we cannot simply go with the flow of a particular culture on the one hand, nor yet simply renounce our own culture as being opposed to the gospel.^[20] Each aspect of culture must be assessed on its own merits. This, too, is a subject for another time.^[21] As C. S. Lewis never tired of saying, there is nothing in God’s world which cannot be redeemed; but there is nothing which can simply be embraced as it stands. Everything must be brought to the bar of the gospel, of the cross and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

It is not, then, simply a matter of working out how, in worship, to bring together the traditional with the contemporary. That is important, but it is equally important to ensure that the tradition is celebrated through the lens of the gospel, not uncritically, and that the contemporary is adopted likewise through the lens of the gospel, not just because it is new. What T. S. Eliot called the “easy commerce of the old and the new” is not, as the poem makes clear, achieved easily or without struggle; but it is there if we will work and pray at it.^[22] It is not a matter of slavishly

adopting a particular culture, whether that of sixteenth-century Europe or of twenty-first-century America; nor, equally, is it a matter of slavishly renouncing the one or the other. (In England this sometimes acquires the dark overtones of class snobbery, both regular and inverted: some people would not want to be caught attending a worship service led with guitars and drums for precisely the same reason that they would not want to be found watching a soap opera, and other people would avoid cathedral-style worship for the same reasons that they would avoid black-tie dinners. This cultural prejudice, which can easily disguise itself with plausible theological language, must be smoked out and repented of.)

Nor is it a matter of working out “what this congregation will be comfortable with.” Who says you ought always to be comfortable in the presence of Almighty God? But nor should one simply ask “what does this congregation need to wake them up?”; who says it is your place to shock and startle the people of God? There will be shocks, of course, and there also will be the deep comfort of the familiar. Good liturgy, planned carefully week by week and year by year, will bring the two together so that they complement and reinforce each other and, most importantly, build up the worshipers in the knowledge and love of God and send them out refreshed for their kingdom-tasks in the world. And if we know what we are about this should mean that in our worship, in its music and readings, in its drama and movement, in its silence as well as its speech, we are not only reflecting different cultures but contributing creatively and in the power of the Spirit to the culture which our God is bringing about in our own day.

In particular, Christians in the western world, and especially in America, have a chance in the twenty-first century, simply because of the de facto cultural hegemony of the west over much of the rest of the planet, to lead the way into a cultural renewal which could refresh the whole world. We also have a chance blindly to lead the blind into a ditch. This is a moment to be used wisely; and the reordering and celebration of Christian worship should be one of the means by which this can be done to best effect.

V. Conclusion

Let me in conclusion re-emphasize, after giving many hostages to

fortune, what seems to me the central point. The gospel of Jesus Christ was seen from the beginning not merely as the way by which sinners could escape judgment, but the way by which, through that salvation, faulty humans could be re-humanized so that they could be God's agents in bringing his love, his wisdom, his creative delight, to bear afresh on the world. Though I have spoken as an Anglican, I have a sense that in many other parts of God's church there are points of natural resonance with what I have said, and I hope readers in other traditions will take it as a stimulus to search the scriptures afresh and to work at liturgy and worship in new ways. We live in exciting and dangerous times, and the gospel of Jesus Christ summons us to live in them as kingdom-people, reflecting God's image into the world. The way to that goal is worship: worship of the true, sovereign, creator God, Father, Son, and Spirit. May the Lord open our lips, so that our mouth may show forth his praise.

* The Revd Dr N. T. Wright, Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, England, is a noted New Testament scholar. This article is a lightly revised version of a lecture given at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, in January 2002. The topic was assigned by the College.

[1] The great Wesley lines, "Till in heaven we take our place:/ till we cast our crowns before thee,/lost in wonder, love and praise," gets this gloriously wrong, implying that the scene here described is the final state of things, not the present one. When Daniel speaks of a revelation of "things that must take place hereafter" (2:28-29, 45), this occurs within a throne room where Daniel is standing before the king.

[2] This is not the place to interact in detail with recent scholarship on Revelation. However the two major recent commentaries of D. E. Aune (3 vols; Word Biblical Commentary 52; Dallas: Word Books 1997-98) and G. K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999) have been helpful. Aune's argument that the present scene reflects and deliberately parodies imperial court practice, and Beale's, that the author is drawing on Old Testament models, especially Ezekiel 1 and above all Daniel 7, are both in my view important, as is the background in synagogue liturgy emphasized by, e.g., R Prigent, *Apocalypse et Liturgie*, Cahiers Theologiques 52; Paris: Delachaux et Niestle 1964. I do not think these should be played off against one another.

- [3] Especially if Aune is right to see this as a parody of the imperial court and cult.
- [4] See particularly R. J. Bauckham *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1993), chapter 4.
- [5] A point forcefully made by C. C. Rowland, *Christian Origins: From Messianic Movement to Christian Religion* (London: SPCK 1985) 293f.
- [6] For details on all of what follows, see my commentary forthcoming in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10.
- [7] The *Shema* prayer, which begins with this declaration, is found in Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Num 15:37-41.
- [8] See N. T. Wright, "New Exodus, New Inheritance: the Narrative Substructure of Romans 3-8" in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. S. K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999) 26-35.
- [9] Luke 9:31.
- [10] See N. T. Wright, "The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer" in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. R. L. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2002) 132-54.
- [11] Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17; see R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd 1953), chapters 16 & 17.
- [12] See, e.g., James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, Carlisle: Paternoster 1996.
- [13] E.g., Rom 12:1-2; 1 Thess 4:1.
- [14] See the interesting essay of P. J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Oxford: OUP 1987.
- [15] *b. Ber.* 7.18, etc.
- [16] See N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (London: SPCK 1997), chapter 12.
- [17] See, famously if controversially, E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns in Religion*, London: SCM 1977.
- [18] E.g., Deut 30:6-10; Jer 32:38-40; 1QS 5.4f.; see my *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK 1996) 282f.
- [19] Jer 17:9; cf. Eph 4:22; Heb 3:13.
- [20] See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper 1951.
- [21] See N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK 1999), chapter 8.
- [22] T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" line 220, in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber 1944) 47.