

Melissa S.C. CHENG / Recovering... Heart of Worship

Recovering the Forgotten in Coming Back to the Heart of Worship

Melissa S.C. CHENG*

When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come.
Longing just to bring something that's of worth that will bless Your heart.
I'll bring You more than a song,
For a song in itself is not what you have required.
You search much deeper within through the way things appear -
You're looking into my heart.
I'm coming back to the heart of worship
And it's all about You, it's all about you, Jesus.
I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it,
When it's all about You, it's all about you, Jesus.
King of endless worth, no one could express how much You deserve.
Though I'm weak and poor, all I have is Yours - every single breath...

Matt Redman¹

The above song, "The Heart of Worship", is a very popular worship song among evangelical circles in North America and England. In a different website, while searching for the lyrics of this song, there was a flashing notice saying that I was the 999,999th person who had visited that site.² Perhaps its popularity lies in its frank confession that often we have made worship something other than what it should be. Furthermore, it expresses a longing which might have been buried too deep beforehand

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1 Michael W. Smith, *The Heart of Worship Lyrics*, 2002-2007 (25 April 2007), <http://www.seeklyrics.com/lyrics/Michael-W-Smith/The-Heart-Of-Worship.html>

2 Matt Redman Lyrics, *Heart of Worship*, 2005-2007 (25 April 2007), <http://www.stlyrics.com/songs/m/mattredman20504/heartofworship542497.html>

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for words and for awareness - that worshippers genuinely want to return to the heart of worship, which is about Jesus Christ. While many evangelical and free churches have adopted a pop-style genre of worship music, there seems to be a self-reflective check, hinted in the words of this song. Somehow, have we made something out of worship which is not worship anymore? When “all is stripped away”, what is left? What, in fact, is worship?

As the evangelicals, with all their new and fresh sounding music and worship service styles, confess their need to return to real worship, which did not necessarily come after trading in the organ for a set of drums, there are Christians who have faithfully attended church Sunday after Sunday, performing the same rites and rituals of their liturgical service, saying the same words over and over again. The size of many liturgical churches has been dwindling, with a common complaint being the meaninglessness of the liturgical service, and the boredom of repetition week after week of the same sayings. They might also question whether this is real worship.

There is restlessness across the ranks. A ritualized liturgical service risks being “boring” and superficial; a very exciting, unpredictable modern service of free or evangelical churches could be hollow and lacking in substance. From liturgical churches to free churches, there is a cry to return to the heart of worship. But where is it to be found? Even when we know that worship is “all about Jesus”, what does this mean? And how can we manifest and practice “real worship” in our Sunday church services?

In this paper, a proposition is made that, in fact, a theologically rich blueprint for Christ-centred worship lies right under our noses, and has been there for the past 1700 years, in the liturgical service of the early Christian church. Our present struggle might be born from our ignorance of what has gone before us, and our lack of wisdom in our oblivion, preventing us from seeing that we are standing on the shoulders of giants. First, an introduction to the origins of the present day type of Sunday worship service of liturgical, more specifically, Anglican, churches, as well as the free evangelical, specifically, contemporary music-driven churches will lay the ground upon which we could then look back a bit further to the ancient times. A brief exploration of the meaning of worship, as it appears in the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New, will augment our appreciation as to how we are to define worship. Then a lengthy part of the paper will deal with the liturgical service of the early church, up until the third

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century, for it is here, in the liturgical service, where many answers can be found. If we are to return to the heart of worship, a return to the appreciation of the essential theology behind the liturgy, as passed down through the centuries, will greatly aid us, whether we are from the liturgical or free church background. From there, the discussion will open more broadly to an examination of the meaning of worship, and the paper will end with practical applications of how this new information can help our churches grow into more mature worshipful communities.

History and the Teachings of the Anglican and the Free Churches

The sixteenth century was a time of great religious upheaval across the European continent. Though ideas of reform were promoted by various individuals in different countries starting from the fourteenth century³, it wasn't until 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church doors at Wittenberg that the Roman Catholic Church was shaken to its core. Instead of the original intention of reforming the Catholic Church, the Reformation movement begot its own churches - the Lutheran churches in Germany, Reformed churches in Switzerland under Zwingli and Calvin, Anglican churches in England. Thus, from the 1500's onwards, the Western church was fragmented into national churches. The Church of England became legally distinct from the Roman Catholic Church during King Henry VIII's reign, largely from more political reasons than purely doctrinal ones. In fact, even at the end of Henry's reign, Anglicanism was still closer in practice to a non-papal version of Catholicism than to Protestantism, not having adopted much of Protestant doctrine nor typically Protestant liturgical practices.⁴ Interestingly, this weak "protesting" against the Roman Catholic way has distinguished the Anglican tradition from its Reformation cousins, the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Even nowadays, there remain Anglicans who do not like to be referred to as "Protestants", as they do not see themselves as having protested, but as having stayed loyal to the original catholic faith passed down by the early church and the Church Fathers.⁵ This keen interest in staying true to the original faith has been a strong part of the Anglican tradition. In the 1600's, Anglican writers studied Greek and

3 J.P. Kirsch, "The Reformation" in *New Advent*, 2007 (25 April 2007), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12700b.htm>

4 Ted A. Campbell, *Christian Confessions: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p.125.

5 *Ibid.*, p.118.

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Latin early Christian texts, “attempting to show that Anglicanism had faithfully followed the church of the first four or five centuries after Christ.”⁶ In the 1830’s in Oxford, there was a movement, born out of a reaction against growing evangelicalism and liberalism, to recapture the traditional Christian identity, stressing their continuity with ancient Christianity, with its emphasis on liturgy and traditional Christian doctrine.⁷ This is not to downgrade the high regard Anglicans have for Scriptural authority. Scripture is held in utmost esteem by Anglicans, as expressed in the Anglican 39 articles, and in the Books of Homilies. The Westminster Confession further states that God has given the Scriptures to make clear God’s will to humankind and that the authority of the Scriptures is based on divine inspiration.⁸ However, outside of Scriptures, traditions, as passed down by the early church and the Church Fathers, are also respected, so long as they do not contradict Scriptural teachings.⁹ This gives the Anglicans more latitude in accepting ancient and medieval practices than those of some other denominations where if a practice is not mentioned in the Bible, it should not be practiced, such as having musical accompaniment to psalms for example. True to their respect for traditions, Anglicans, like the Lutherans, also affirm the three ancient creeds, the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and Athanasian Creed. But the one unique possession of Anglicans is the Book of Common Prayer. This book testifies to the Anglicans’ allegiance to the ancient and medieval church traditions whether in matters of daily worship, the celebration of the eucharist, or the observance of rites. It contains rituals based on the medieval Roman traditions of worship, the “Sarum rite”, with some Continental and Byzantine traditions also mixed in.¹⁰ The Book of Common Prayer almost serves as a direct link between Anglicans everywhere and the Christians of the first centuries, since many of the practices (liturgy shown below) are kept more or less similar to the original. This gives Anglicanism a unique sense of connectedness to the ancient Christian tradition.¹¹

It is no wonder then that the liturgy used on Sunday eucharist service varies little in its structure from week to week. It is part of the testimony of continuity with the

6 Ibid., p.127.

7 Ibid., p.129.

8 Ibid., p.135.

9 Ibid., p.141.

10 Ibid., p.143.

11 Ibid.

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ancients of 2000 years ago. It also testifies to the core beliefs in Anglicanism about church and the sacraments. To Anglicans, church is the community of believers in which the Word of God is preached and where the sacraments are administered. Thus, every week, the faithful would gather together, and participate in the liturgy, which always contains both the elements of preaching of God's Word and the Eucharist. We will return to the contents of the liturgy at a later point.

Now let us look at the development of the Free or Evangelical churches and their set of teachings and doctrines. Free or Evangelical churches are also Protestant churches. They came out of the Reformation movement of the sixteenth century as well. The distinguishing features of the free or evangelical churches are that they are not state-run churches - thus "free" - with members joining on a voluntary basis, having been converted to Christianity through a personal experience of God's salvation - thus "evangelical". Interestingly, most free and evangelical churches are non-liturgical. A bit of historical background would make this easily understandable. The tradition of free churches grew out of a cultural climate where Christianity had become scholastic and dogmatic¹², to the point of being esoteric and almost useless for everyday life. There was a strong undercurrent of suspicion of anything formal, including creeds, doctrinal statements, rituals etc., seeing these as limiting and constricting at best, and potentially idolatrous at worst. These churches, thus, stress the personal experience with God as being the meter stick of spirituality and faith. Personal conversion is necessary before one can be called a Christian. This, then, rules out the practice of infant baptism, because the infant would have no autonomy or intellectual capability at that point to make a decision about Jesus Christ one way or another. And since religion is a "matter of the heart"¹³, not a matter of external show, the worship style is a lot freer and more spontaneous than their counterparts in the liturgical tradition. Scripture is held in the highest esteem - Scripture and Scripture alone. So for most free and evangelical churches, there is a strong emphasis on Bible teaching and knowledge. Furthermore, since salvation is a personal matter, and one cannot be grandfathered into the church, evangelism becomes essential. So the core beliefs of these churches can be summarised as follows: salvation depends on a personal experience of conversion, thus church membership is on a voluntary basis; there is an urgent need for evangelism because of

12 Ibid., p.188.

13 Ibid., p.186.

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the former conviction; the Bible is the only authority on spiritual matters, and it does not share a platform with traditions; personal godliness in keeping with biblical teaching and out of thanksgiving for the salvific grace of God is expected.

The belief about the church is that it is a fellowship of believers. Whereas the eucharist and baptism are sacraments in the liturgical churches, they are considered ordinances in these churches, done in obedience to Jesus' commands, without any special powers or other spiritual significance on their own during their re-enactment. Churches that came from this tradition include the Baptist church out of the reformed tradition in England, the revival and great awakening churches both in England and in the United States, from which came the Methodist churches. There are also Restorationist churches from the reformed Presbyterian tradition and Holiness churches which came subsequently from the Methodist tradition. The Holiness churches then divided, from which Pentacostal churches originated. These are but a few of the more well-known free and evangelical church denominations. There are many other ones, and the list is still growing.

Within this stream of free evangelical churches, there has been a movement from a "traditional" worship style to a contemporary music-driven worship style. The change is based much on the same reasons as their separating from the liturgical churches back in the 1600's - that of a hollowness of routines, and the lack of relevance of the worship service to the new generation. A traditional Protestant church worship service usually comprises an opening hymn, accompanied by piano or organ, followed by a prayer, announcements, a few more hymns, collection of offering while special music is played, the sermon, and a hymn of response followed by a closing prayer.¹⁴ In the 1970's, many of the young people at church found this routine hollow: "For much of post-Christian America in the 1970's, church music had become a stumbling block rather than an avenue for connecting with God. Organ music... no longer bore any resemblance to the music that so deeply stirred the hearts of [this] generation."¹⁵ Thus, in order to make the worship service relevant again, many young leaders contemporized the Sunday service, adopting modern music styles and instruments, to appeal not only to the young churchgoers, but moreover, to reach out to a new generation of non-churchgoers. The leaders who spearheaded this revolution were passionate to proclaim

14 Martin Thielen, *Ancient Modern Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p.12.

15 *Exploring the Worship Spectrum*, Paul A. Basden ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p.105.

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that a relationship with God could be very personal, vibrant and transformational, and that others outside the church walls also needed to know that this was their God, who actively sought to relate to them as well. They reasoned that a contemporary style of music, with drums and guitars, would help close the gap between the church and the outside culture. There is no firm structure dictating the service hour of the contemporary music-driven church, but all the songs sung and words spoken revolve around this one end - to meet with Jesus in a personal and transformational way, and to express heartfelt love to Jesus. While traditional hymns tell us about God's attributes, the contemporary songs give people a chance to express themselves, which is seen as an offering of love and thanksgiving to God. The flow of a contemporary music-driven service might consist of praise choruses interspersed with spontaneous prayers by the worship leader, drama, the use of various props including banners, a need-based topical sermon, and more praise songs to close the worship time.¹⁶

From the above, we can now understand more of the origin of the method of worship adopted by an Anglican church versus a contemporary music-driven church. The respect for the liturgical tradition is ingrained in Anglicanism just as deeply as the suspicion of any "outdated" traditions is ingrained in the contemporary church. Is one right and the other wrong? Before we can answer that question, we need to explore the meaning of worship further. For that, we need to go back to the original source which can shed light on the issue - the Bible.

Worship in the Old and New Testament

In the Bible, one encounters worship very early on, in Genesis 4:3-5, with the story of Cain and Abel presenting offerings to the Lord. Throughout the narration of the history of the Israelites, worship of the true God, Yahweh, is one of the most important concerns. The Bible, in fact, ends with a scene of the fulfilment of worship in the new Jerusalem, where there is no temple anymore, because the Lamb is there. The Lamb and the Lord Almighty are the temple (Rev. 21:22). We can spend years studying in depth the biblical portrayal of worship, but of course, there is no time nor space for such fine combing in this paper, so let me point out some of the major characteristics of worship which are quite obvious in the Bible. Starting with the Old Testament, we see that

16 Thielen (2000), p.12.

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worship is part and parcel of the establishment of a covenant between God and His people the Israelites.

The Israelites' worship is often centred around an event and is covenantal in nature.¹⁷ One of the most obvious and important event is the Exodus out of Egypt. After God had delivered the Israelites from the hand of the Pharaoh, God gave Moses instructions as to how this redeemed people were to worship their God. The account is recorded in Exodus 19-24. In the passage we find that God was the initiator of the worship (Ex. 24:1). He was the one who told Moses to prepare for a session of worship, where different people played different parts in the ceremony, and each person, from the most important leader to the least of the people, had an active role and a unique relationship with God (24:1, 5). Third, God proclaimed His commands to the people (24:3, 7). The people responded after hearing the words with the renewal of commitment to obedience (24:3b, 7). The worship ends with the sealing of the covenant between God and His people through sprinkling sacrificial blood onto the people (24:5, 8). Thus, in this passage, we see some core characteristics of worship, namely, that worship stems from a covenantal nature, with God taking the active role of calling a people for Himself; worship involves all the people in various participatory roles; God's commands or words are proclaimed in worship, with an appropriate response from the people; and finally, the relationship between God and His people is sealed by a sprinkling of blood.¹⁸

The unfaithfulness of the Israelites in this covenantal relationship, defined by their disobedience to God usually expressed in worshipping of other gods, was a cause for much of God's grief over and discipline of His people. The prophets' words of warning to the Israelites are usually along these lines.¹⁹ Thus worship is also seen as a barometer of the Israelites' spiritual health.²⁰ When they worshipped, they were close to God; when they didn't, they had actually fallen away from Him. When they worshipped and their King had torn down all the high places and Asherah poles, they were blessed by the Lord. When they ran after other gods, and profaned His Name by breaking the

17 Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old & New: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Introduction*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p.20.

18 Ibid., p.21.

19 John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), chapter 1 or pp.23-37.

20 Ibid., p.25.

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Ten commandments, they usually would run into trouble, which culminated in the destruction of both northern and southern kingdoms and the exile to Babylon.

Often worship in the Old Testament is also seen as the people making vows to the Lord.²¹ An example is when Joshua assembled the Israelites at Shechem where the covenant between God and His people was renewed. Joshua recounted God's faithfulness and guidance of the Israelites from the patriarchs on down, and the people responded by re-committing their lives and vowing to serve and obey God (Josh. 24:1-27). In the Psalms, there are plenty of examples where vows accompany sacrifice and worship to the Lord (Ps. 22:25; 50:14; 56:12; 61:8; 66:13).

One of the two other quite obvious traits about worship in the Old Testament is that worship occurs at certain times and places.²² In Deuteronomy 5:15, the Israelites are commanded to observe the Sabbath day, keeping it holy, in the attitude of worship. The second is that worship is celebrated as a public event. It is done at a certain time and place, with the whole people.

In the New Testament, the covenantal theme of worship is brought to its height with Christ being the new covenant God establishes with humans. Christ is the real Passover lamb. Again, God is seen as the initiator; people are welcomed, and called to participate; there is proclamation of a new promise, which is Christ, the real Word of God made flesh; we are invited to respond to His call and commit our lives to Him, and the covenant is sealed with the blood of the Lamb, shed for us all.

In the New Testament, worship is communal and public, as well as occurring in special times and places. Jesus Himself taught His disciples to remember Him when they re-enact the last meal they had together, where the bread and wine, signifying the sacrifice Christ was going to make on their behalf, were shared and taken by the disciples, as Christ's own body and blood, shed for them.

Also in the New Testament, there is a role for the worshipper to respond in loving obedience, perhaps a parallel to the vows the Israelites used to make to God in response to His faithfulness. In Romans 12:1, we are told that "in view of God's mercy", shown in Christ, we are to "offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is [our] spiritual act of worship."

21 Ibid., p.28.

22 Webber (1994), p.26.

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In both the Old and the New Testaments, we can see that the covenantal relationship is very important and is the basis of worship rendered to God. Worship revolves around an event and the remembrance of the event. It is an event in which God intervened on behalf of His people, out of His faithfulness in His covenantal relationship, and out of His love for His people. Whereas worship in a pagan society revolves around the cycle of nature, celebrating the passing and arrival of different seasons, the Jewish and Christian calendars (OT and NT) revolve around historical events, marking God's action on earth.²³

Worship is initiated by God. He is the God of action and promise.²⁴ God's actions and His Word are proclaimed and remembered corporatively, instilling a sense of awe, inspiring hope and increasing trust in the continued faithfulness of God into the future.

The covenant is sealed with a sacrifice. The people, in having been the recipients of God's grace, respond by publically re-committing their lives to God in obedient service, the spiritual act of worship.

Having distilled out the qualities of worship which run through both the Old and the New Testament, we have still to consider one elusive but crucial characteristic of biblical worship. If one observes worship from Genesis to Revelation, an overarching quality is that the expressions of worship change with time and context. Altars for prayer and sacrifices were part of worship for the patriarchs; the temple with more formalized rituals, complete with official singers and priests, was the way of worship for Solomon and the Kingdom of Judah. After the exile, only smaller gatherings were possible, and animal sacrifices were ruled out, since sacrifice could only be offered at the Temple. This led to the development of synagogues, with the emphasis of reading the Torah, saying prayers and reciting psalms, replacing animal sacrifices.²⁵ So although the core of worship, that is, the covenantal nature, the special allotment of specific times and places of worship, remained unchanged, the expressions of these qualities changed with the changing environment in which the Israelites found themselves. There is flexibility, and this flexibility was not contentious nor divisive, but seen as a natural

23 Witvliet (2003), p.34.

24 Ibid., p.73.

25 Basden (2004), p.14.

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sequence of appropriate adaptability to fluctuating climes. We will revisit this observation later on.

Worship and Liturgy

Robert E. Webber states in his book, “Worship Old & New” that “what lies at the heart of worship is God’s continual movement toward the peoples of the world and the continual response of the people of God in faith and obedience.”²⁶ John Burkhart says that “worship is the celebrative response to what God has done, is doing and promises to do.”²⁷ Peter Brunner describes worship using the term, “Gottesdienst” to signify the duality of worship: God’s service to humans and humans’ service to God.²⁸ Paul W. Hoon sees worship as involving revelation and response.²⁹ We have seen these definitions borne out in the Old and New Testament’s depiction of worship.

And now, I propose that a very close model of this type of worship is found in the practice of the early church, up until the third century. We do not have an abundance of information of how the early church worshipped - most of our knowledge is based on just a few surviving documents: *The Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome, the *Didascalia* of the apostles originating from northern Syria, and the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Origen.³⁰ If one follows the liturgy of the worship service recorded in these documents,³¹ dated around the second century AD, one would find that it is almost the same as the liturgy still used for Sunday services in the Anglican churches of the twenty first century. The Book of Common Prayer has stayed faithful to the tradition passed down by the early church. There is still the salutation (“The Lord be with you”, “and with thy spirit”), the Sursum Corda (“Lift up your hearts.” “We lift them up to the Lord.” Etc.), the Sanctus (“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty...”), Kyrie, “Thanks be to God”, and the Lord’s Prayer. So let us examine step by step what this very old and traditional liturgy teaches us about worship.

26 Webber (1994), p.19.

27 Witvliet (2003), p.31.

28 *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, Dwight W. Vogel ed. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), p.5.

29 Ibid.

30 Webber (1994), p.95.

31 A sample is given on Webber (1994), p.96.

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Sunday Service Liturgy Outlined³²

There are usually four parts to the service: introductory rites, liturgy of the Word, liturgy of the Eucharist, and concluding rites.

The introductory rites include the entrance hymn, the procession of the vicar, the other leaders and assistants and the choir, introductory remarks, a call to penance, penitential rites, singing of Kyrie and or Gloria, and the Collect. These activities all help the individuals to increasingly shed their isolation and come together to form one worshipping community. They help us find our common identity in the Presence of God in Christ.³³ When we gather together, and we confess our sins, we are not focused on our individual failings for the week. We are not using that time for private matters. The confession and call to penance are to ask forgiveness for the corporate sin of failing, as a group, to live up to the standard of being Christ's Body, the sign of His in-breaking Kingdom, here on earth. So the more we enter into worship, the more of the self or "I" is shed away, as we assume increasingly a corporate identity, the Body of Christ, by which we come before God in worship.

In the liturgy of the Word, the worshippers are asked to listen to the Word of the Lord. One of the Hebrew terms used for "word" is "dabar", which also means an event, so that when we are invited to hear the Word of the Lord, we are invited to hear not just words but an event which the Lord has done. This is synchronic with what was discussed above, where the worship in biblical times centred around events. Thus, when we listen to the first reading from the Old Testament, we are mindful of the actions of God in the past. When listening to the Gospel, this phrase takes on a triple meaning. The Word is not only words of the passage selected for reading that morning, but it is also the Word made flesh, who is Christ, and thirdly, it is the "event" of Christ on earth, which is our salvation. The third reading, usually taken from the epistles, is like the interpretation of Christ, as *The Word*, for the believers. So, the Scriptures, taken as the events of God with humans, orient us to the actions and the way of God on earth - what He has done in the past, is doing in the present, and will do in the future. Since all of God's actions, His promises, and His ways point to and are fulfilled in Christ, then this liturgy of the Word is ultimately about Christ.

32 Mark Searle, *Liturgy Made Simple* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), pp.35-69.

33 Ibid., pp.35-36.

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Furthermore, as Searle puts it, the Scriptures are the memory of the Church. Without memory, we are lost. By remembering the past, we can understand the present. The Bible is not primarily a book of laws, nor a history book, to be read for its own sake, or for the sake of re-living in the past, without much interaction with the present world. The Scriptures “are read as the memory which makes the present intelligible, to help us understand our own lives and interpret the significant events in our lives and in our world” through the Word of God.³⁴ If looked at from this angle, then the homily given by the preacher goes very nicely with the rest of the Scripture readings. First of all, he or she usually expounds on one or two passages from the readings from that morning. So it serves as a “contemporary reading” in line with the Old Testament and the Gospel.³⁵ Going back to our earlier point of Christ being the centre of the Scripture readings, we can see here that Christ is made contemporaneous with all three readings as well as with the homily. The Old Testament points towards Christ, and prepares for Christ. The New Testament reading interprets Christ for the early Christians. The Gospel talks directly about Jesus Christ and His life on earth. The homily continues to reveal Christ’s presence in our present time and place.

The response to the Word is much like the response expected of the Old Testament Israelites and the first Christians of the New Testament. We are to receive the Word with thanksgiving, taking the message to heart. We give assent of faith in this trustworthy God, and act on that confidence by re-committing to living in obedience to Him. Our response is that we are further encouraged to once again offer up our bodies as living sacrifices to God. So after hearing the readings, there is a chance for the congregation to be active participants of worship, first through coming together in confession as the Body of Christ as the Creed is recited communally. Then, again, as the Body of Christ, the worshippers are drawn into unity as they pray prayers of intercession, imitating Christ when He prayed for His disciples and for the world the night He was betrayed. This is an act of community, commending to God the world in which we are sent to serve as His ambassadors. Prayer is also an expression of our responsibility for our brothers and sisters under God,³⁶ remembering and presenting the needs of the Church, from the worldwide Christian community to the local parishioners,

34 Ibid., p.42.

35 Ibid., p.44.

36 Ibid., p.50.

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to God. Heeding the teachings of the New Testament, we pray also for our leaders, pray for the oppressed and those suffering. In praying, we identify ourselves with the rest of the people living in the world, growing into our role as our brother's keepers, and our status as salt and light of the world, as we seek God's Face in the preservation of people under His care. This act of intercession makes us priests for the rest of the world, especially when we pray for those who cannot pray for themselves.³⁷

The next part of the service is the liturgy of the eucharist. This actually is the answer to our wholehearted response to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. I say this not because in the liturgy of the eucharist, we are actually offering up our sacrifice to God, as the Catholics believe, but because the only response required of us, upon having received grace and forgiveness from God, is to believe in His Son. Here, graciously, we are allowed to express our belief in Christ as we celebrate the eucharist which He Himself instituted. As the sequence of the Last Supper is re-told, so it is re-enacted by the officiant at the Lord's table at the front of the church, and participated in by the congregation. A parallel action to the Lord taking bread and wine is the offertory, in which the worshippers freely give over their offerings to God. In the first centuries, this included food stuff and harvest goods. It was meant as a sharing of gifts, a redistribution of wealth, in imitation of Christ sharing His life with us.³⁸ Jesus said a prayer of blessing over the bread and wine, and similarly, the congregation is led in the Eucharistic prayer, which includes the Lord's Prayer at the end, and concludes with the exchange of peace. As we move through these different prayers, we are in fact, breaking down the barriers which separate us in the outside world, barriers such as social and educational status, cultural and language barriers, age, gender issues etc. We plead for forgiveness from God for our sins, in the Lord's prayer, but we also state right after pleading forgiveness, "as we forgive those who have sinned against us". The exchange of peace after the Lord's Prayer is the time we make true our words, by extending the peace and forgiveness we receive from God to the neighbours beside us. It is an active and edifying exchange of peace, a declaration that we value God's ways, and His command to forgive, more than any grudges we might have against one another. And as we exchange peace, we are confirming our obedience and our assent to be followers of Christ, where He has commanded us to leave our offering at the altar and be reconciled

37 Ibid., p.50.

38 Ibid., p.58.

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first to our brothers before we offer anything to God (Matt. 5:23-24). The exchange of peace is a very joyous occasion, and the bond of love at that moment, which originates from God and for God's sake, not by human efforts, gives us a taste of heaven. In fact, it is a moment of heaven, and of Kingdom life.

Then Jesus identified Himself with the bread and wine, which He broke in order to share its life-giving properties with others. The officiant breaks the bread and pours out the wine in front of the congregation, stirring our imagination to recall the original event 2000 years ago, reminding us that Jesus lived His life not for Himself, but He existed for the sake of others, to give life to others, in obedience to His Father's Will. As Jesus gave the broken pieces of bread and passed the cup around the table to His apostles, so too, we as the congregation are invited to share in this meal as we go up to the Lord's table and receive the bread and the wine from God through the officiant. That we all receive the same bread and the same wine is again a sign of the unity we have, as sinners redeemed by Christ. As it reaffirms our unity, it simultaneously discredits all that superficially separates us from each other, making our divisions and classes irrelevant under the shadow of the Cross.³⁹ Just as Christ's work on the Cross ripped the curtain in the Holy of Holies in two, annihilating the distance between God and humans, so His work also destroys the barriers we put up between each other. Thus to eat the bread is to enter into communion with Christ and with each other.⁴⁰ The one always goes hand in hand with the other. And as we share in the cup, we are anticipating the heavenly banquet where we will feast with the Lord, but we are also reminded of the bitter cup which Jesus had to take, and which might await us as well. We share in all of it - in Christ's suffering, and in Christ's victory. The process of taking the bread and the wine brings the worshippers closer and closer to God and to each other, made possible solely because of Christ's work. With the exchange of peace, we have reconciliation one with the other, having cleared the space, as it were, between us. But in sharing the bread and the wine, we have filled the space between and within us with the same thing - with the nurture and life that comes from God, and is *in* Christ. We concede to drinking from the cup, the cup of Christ's suffering, perhaps our own too, but borne in and with Christ, and the cup of hope of the coming Kingdom. Thus communion, when we stop to think about it, is profound each time we re-enact it. Not only are we

39 Ibid., p.67.

40 Ibid.

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remembering what Christ has done 2000 years ago, we are living the reality of the results of His redemption, perhaps we are living our the answer to the prayer He prayed in Gethsemane, which is for the unity of all who follow Him. Our Communion is the communion with God through Christ, but, just as His ways are always miraculous and full of surprises, this communion inevitably means that we are in communion with each other too, again through and in Christ, as members of His Body, as part of God's family. When Christ brings peace, it is a peace that is all-encompassing, and touches every relationship there is between and within people. Jesus told His disciples to "do this, in remembrance of [Him]" (Lk. 22:19). As we also "do this" in remembrance of Christ, we discover the meaning of His Words, and the meaning of remembrance, through the action of "doing this". This echoes one of the great mysteries of God's ways - that it is not by studying but by obeying that we come to know God. It is through actions that we know. The psalmist said in Psalm 119:100, "I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts." Once we step out in faith and obedience, then the way of God becomes clear.

The service concludes with concluding rites, which consist of a blessing, and dismissal. The congregation, having shared in the paschal mystery, is sent out into the world to live, for another week, as Christ's Body, as the sign of His kingdom here on earth. They are sent out forgiven, encouraged, restored, blessed, and in hope, victoriously and with grace.

Liturgical Theology

The reason I spent so much time examining the liturgical service passed down from the early Christian church is that there are many elements of this service which contribute to our understanding and, shall we say, practice, of worship. It is true that the "heart of worship" is Jesus Christ. But *how* is He the heart of worship? And what does it mean that the heart of worship is Christ? Is it just intellectual consent to this fact, or does this truth impact our lives and our mindset? Does this truth transform us? It seems like some of these questions are answered in a liturgical service.

How is Christ the centre of the liturgical service? First of all, He *is* the Word, or "event" we are celebrating and worshipping when we gather on Sundays. Both the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist are about Christ. The liturgy of the

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Word reveals the deeper pattern of God's activity in the world, which finds its ultimate expression in Jesus. The liturgy of the eucharist calls us to participate in and surrender to that activity⁴¹, in order to have real life. Liturgy is a celebration of the ongoing process of redemption made possible by Christ in and of the world.⁴² We are testimonies of that redemption, and every time we participate in it, we witness to it anew. The liturgy begins and ends with the sign of the Cross⁴³, sometimes literally. It is all about Jesus. As Searle says in page 28 of his insightful book, the heart of liturgy is the "paschal mystery". It is God's initiative and our response to it revealed in and through Christ. We enter into God's holiness as we enter into liturgy. The mechanism of redemption is unfathomable by our limited intelligence and imagination. There is a holy, awesome mystery behind Christ's sacrifice of Himself for our redemption, and we are invited, during the liturgical hour, to immerse ourselves in that mystery. We will never fully comprehend the vastness and magnitude of Christ's work, but that is different from saying that the rites and rituals are meaningless, because of a lack of understanding. We only know that God has acted, and we have been saved, and our salvation is sealed by the blood of the new covenant in Christ. We do not understand the logistics, nor the price it really cost God. How can we, as none of us have even the faintest idea of what death really is? Yet we are welcomed into this mystery, by the grace of God. We are welcomed to participate in it, and be transformed by it. Searle puts it wonderfully in this way, "Liturgy is not a celebration of life as we know it as it is a celebration of the mystery of life as we hardly suspect."⁴⁴ How true. Jesus has said that we needed to become like little children if we were to enter the Kingdom of God. Children are creatures full of wonder. They don't know the laws behind nature, the physical mechanisms fuelling life, but they see butterflies fluttering colourful wings, and they giggle with delight. They can blow a thousand soap bubbles, without getting disappointed with the flight track of just one of those bubbles. When we enter into liturgy, our ignorance of the mechanisms of salvation is not a deficiency, but the impetus for wonder of God's ways being so much higher than our ways. As Alexander Schmemmann so aptly notes, in coming to worship, "what is needed is not so much the

41 Ibid., p.65.

42 Ibid., p.19.

43 Ibid., p.27.

44 Ibid., p.30.

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intellectual apprehension of worship as is apprehension through experience and prayer.”⁴⁵ Invariably, the apprehension from experience and prayer augments our wonder for God, and leads us into holy ground. And we discover anew, that in the holiest place stands the One who laid down His life for our sakes.

Christ’s story is the overarching story behind everything, as everything was made by and through Him. (Col. 1:16) Christ’s story is that which gives meaning to our story, “through the incorporation of [our] story into His.... The liturgy of the church celebrates this true story through re-enactment.”⁴⁶ And our response constitutes the “stuff” of worship: we proclaim, recall, re-enact God’s saving deeds, we respond by remembering, anticipating, celebrating, serving⁴⁷, in wonder, awe, praise, prayer, action. The focus of the whole service is on God and Christ. He increasing, we decreasing, but being continually lifted up by Him.

There is an incredible lightness amidst the seriousness of the service. Romano Guardini describes it as the playfulness of liturgy.⁴⁸ He argues that liturgy has no purpose in and of itself, but it is full of profound meaning, just like playing is for a child - it is not striving for any goal in particular, for the goal is playing itself, and the play itself is full of meaning. The liturgy itself does not edify or make us better people. It is not work, nor a work we are producing in order to please God, or to gain merit. It is play. We are not to do, but to be; we are not to create, but to exist, and to enjoy being reconciled, and in the presence of God. And as such there is an incredible lightness born from joy and humble confidence in the love of God for us.

Liturgy is festive and doxological, not ordinary or utilitarian.⁴⁹ It celebrates Christ’s victory and our aliveness because of Christ. He is the victor, He has conquered death. We remember and proclaim and celebrate this each time we participate in the eucharist.

Even from the above brief examination of liturgy, one gets a sense that paradoxes abound. At one point, liturgy is a human creation, yet it pertains to the divine. It is both personal and communal. There is a routineness yet also a newness as well.

45 Vogel (2000), p.69.

46 Robert E. Webber, *Liturgical Evangelism: Worship as Outreach and Nurture* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1986), p.5.

47 Webber (1994), p.27.

48 Vogel (2000), pp.38-45.

49 *Ibid.*, p.97.

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There is time for penitence and petition, but also time for praise and joyous celebration. There is knowledge and there is ignorance. There is wondrous mystery and there is plain revelation. We listen to and remember God's Word, while we are abiding in His Word, in Christ. We decrease, yet we are exalted. We come before His presence spiritually lacking, having stripped off all worldly entanglements and barriers we cling on to as our securities, yet we are closer to God and each other than at any other time. In a way, our experience of the liturgical service is a reflection of the tension of the sublime paradox of the Kingdom of heaven being even now manifested on earth, among God's people. The Kingdom cannot be seen, yet when we live and act in obedience to God, as we do here in remembering and celebrating Christ, we experience it, and its blessedness. The Kingdom is here among us.

Bringing the Essence of Liturgy back to Churches, Liturgical and Evangelical

But as we look at the Sunday services, the problems mentioned at the beginning of the paper remain. The routineness of the liturgy drives many away, while the upbeat free style of worship in evangelical churches still lacks "something".

Yes, the liturgy is a ritual, and as such, if one does not understand the meaning behind all the words and actions, then one's participation seems meaningless and a waste of time. We are not called to participate in meaningless activities. Unfortunately, the lack of address of this issue is also part of the mentality that has been passed down to us. In the medieval times, the "mystery" aspect of the eucharist took on an erroneous meaning, so that mystery became almost synonymous with magic. The congregation was separated and became mainly an audience looking on at the priest performing the spiritual and "mysterious" acts of breaking the bread and pouring the wine. The liturgy was in Latin, not in the vernacular, rendering the whole service like a superstitious event where one just had to attend in order to be blessed. As the heart of worship is Christ, and liturgy is only a tool to point to Christ, a tool for worshipping Christ, the whole liturgical service lost its meaning and function when it was viewed as something sacred in and of itself. It became "hocus pocus" to the people. We still use that phrase today to mean meaningless chatter or something associated with trickery or magic. The origin of that phrase is apparently from a saying in the liturgical mass, "hoc est corpus meus", the

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Latin translation of Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "this is my body".⁵⁰ Yet, the ritual was so magical, and the words so meaningless, that the corruption of the phrase became "hocus pocus". What a sad legacy we have left, and how we have failed Jesus in taking care of His sheep!

Liturgy, as we have just seen, can be very rich in meaning for the worshippers. Though ritualistic, it is "new" every time, different every time, because it is a new encounter with God. In liturgical churches, a very simple thing to do in order to enhance people's worship is to have a class to teach about the origins and the meaning behind liturgy. The famous phrase attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine, "lex orandi, lex credendi"⁵¹ denotes that what we pray is what we believe. In other words, our liturgy reflects our theology. If that is the case, then a class on the meaning behind liturgy would be greatly beneficial for the worshippers, because not only can they become active participants in liturgy, experiencing Christ as part of His Body here on earth, they can also have a conscious appreciation of this fact. Searle, in his introduction to the book, "Liturgy Made Simple", used a humorous story to illustrate the sad truth that many worshippers do not understand what they do in liturgy on Sunday mornings. He said it is like two Englishmen who were stranded on an island and had afternoon tea together every day for many years, but never talked to each other. "Why did they not talk to each other?" one might ask. It is because no one had introduced them to each other. Similarly, one easy way to rectify this weaknesses of liturgical churches would be to hold a thorough and engaging introductory course in liturgy for the new members. The liturgy passed down through the ages is full of deep and good theology for the modern Christian. It is like a treasure hidden in an old, plain wooden box. It might be inaccessible because it is locked. Then the box remains just a plain box, irrelevant, useless, meaningless to the seeker. If the church has the key to open the box, it is our duty to offer it to the one searching for the treasure.

As for the evangelical churches, a bold suggestion is that as they seek to get back to the heart of worship. They should also reconsider their own heritage, which did not begin only at the time of the Reformation, but has a history that spans 2000 years. Instead of shying away from anything ritualistic, because of the association of ritualism with meaningless action and insincerity or idolatry (when Christ ceases to be the

50 From dogmatics class with Dr. Jochen Teuffel at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong.

51 Vogel (2000), p.10.

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purpose and goal of ritualistic worship), they should perhaps explore the strengths of rituals, recognizing that they are only tools to serve in worship, and not to be served and worshipped in and of itself.

I am not advocating a return to the roots for the sake of loyalty to our heritage, or for nostalgia's sake. It is also not because I consider the liturgical service superior to the contemporary one. Both could be worship, and both could be just an hour sitting in a building with others. I say that re-examining the essence of liturgy is worthwhile because what is lacking in the contemporary service is a more God-directed gaze. The songs sung are expressions of the worshippers' thankfulness or prayer to God. They are very effective in translating our heartfelt yearnings into words. They give voice to our needs and desires, and they bring comfort as we hear these things with our own ears. However, they focus on us. That is the danger. There is a lack of grandeur and wonder that overcome us when we fall silent before God. We need to cast aside our needs, sometimes even our need to thank God, and just consider Who He is and what He has done, especially in Jesus Christ. In the contemporary service, we might become too preoccupied about our response to God at the expense of not remembering and thinking deeply about what God has done for us to begin with. There is a tendency towards self-actualization (and this even in our desire to worship God!), at the expense of a lack of transcendence.

Furthermore, having a sensitivity against the dangers of ritualism gives contemporary churches an upper hand in using rites and rituals properly. Incorporating some old rituals might be a refreshing break from their regular service, where sometimes, the entertaining value and interest scale of the songs and sermons are the meter stick of the effectiveness of the service. It might be edifying for evangelicals to experiment with old ritualistic ways of worship because rituals can form us. Certainly, it is not as entertaining as new music and new beats, for it is not entertainment, nor does it aim to have us on the edge of our seats all the time.⁵² Quite the opposite: liturgy "brings us back to old words until we begin to understand them... to old signs until we begin to see what they mean."⁵³ There is a depth to some of the "old" words and ways that is all but missing in the new style. As Harold Best commented, "There is no deep and probing equivalent in the contemporary, say, to the Brahms *Requiem* or Handel's *Messiah*.

52 Searle (1981), p.30.

53 Ibid.

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There is only the popular, and as those of us who love the popular know, it must be legitimately shallow to be popular.”⁵⁴

The evangelical church is strong in their Bible knowledge, and in their personal experience of God. Another gift liturgy can offer compliments these strengths, for liturgy presents an experiential worship of God that is through re-enactment of the paschal mystery right then and there during the Sunday service. Instead of being an “audience” at church, worshipping as a group of individuals, praying individual prayers to God, and listening to sermons for points on better godly living, or for new insights into Christianity, the liturgy requires that the worshippers actively acknowledge their unity as the Body of Christ, coming together in unison in prayer and adoration of God. They need to exchange peace and bless each other, they need to act as priests interceding together for others. They need to confess their common faith in God. They need to ask for forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer, in the hearing of their neighbours. Instead of passing a tray of the bread and wine along the aisles, the worshippers go up to receive the bread and wine at Christ’s table. All these little things, subtle as they may be, add to worship, because worship is an active, expressive entity. To only sit and acknowledge worship intellectually is to strip it of its colourful, vivid and playful nature. Worship involves the entire person, and all his senses. Getting up, bowing down, confessing and blessing one another, praying together, sharing the same piece of bread - all these are gateways for evangelicals to start apprehending worship through experience and prayer.

Conclusion

Since the time of the Reformation, the Protestant Church has kept splitting into new denominations. There are pros and cons to all the divisions. We lose some things, we gain others, in the process. It is not my attempt to try and bring all the churches together again, and ignore the differences. Differences, definitely, can be celebrated. What is needed, however, is more dialogue between the different denominations. This has started already with the Ecumenical movement. There are so many things we can learn from each other. Though splits in churches might come from initial irreconcilable differences, cutting off communication altogether, there is a time for reconciliation

54 Basden (2004), p.123.

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again. And both sides could be pleasantly surprised that the strengths of each side complement the weaknesses of the other. Just looking at worship styles, one can already see this. In the liturgical tradition, theology, orthodoxy, universality, historic connection, liturgical worship, social action and an incarnational understanding of the church⁵⁵ are all strengths that can broaden the appreciation of the vastness of Christianity for the evangelicals. Meanwhile, the evangelicals can share their expertise in biblical foundation, their emphasis on personal conversion, evangelism and mission, pulpit-centred worship, personal holiness and biblical and reformational understanding of the church⁵⁶ with the Christians from the liturgical traditions. If we are the Body of Christ, it is inevitable and in fact, necessary, that we are different from each other. Yet, just like the ear cannot say to the eye that it doesn't need the eye, so no denomination can say to the next that it is not needed. Our head is Christ, and we share in His blood, which courses through the whole Body, uniting us together as one.

In this paper, I have attempted to indicate how an understanding of the liturgy passed down to us by the early Christians can help both the liturgical and the evangelical churches rediscover the meaning of worship. Although I have mainly emphasized the beauty and depth of the liturgy, it is not because I would like all Christians to return to a liturgical tradition. Far from it. What is more important is the Christ-centredness, and the covenantal, participatory nature that the liturgical worship brings out that is emphasized, for that is the essence of worship. The exterior expressions can change, and sometimes must, as we have seen even in the various expressions of worship styles in the Bible, but the core needs to remain the same. The traditional liturgy contains much of the "core" of worship in its expression. There is much we can learn from and adapt into our own traditions, whether we come from already a liturgical background, or an evangelical one. What is more, as we all seek to worship in spirit and in truth, we can increase the dialogue between each other, for we are all part of one Body. Much good can come out of it. And as we humbly learn from each other, it is wise to remember what the seventeenth century Moravian bishop, Johann Amos Comenius, said, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things charity."⁵⁷

55 Webber (1994), p.133.

56 Ibid. Webber lists a table of the strengths of liturgical, evangelical and charismatic churches here.

57 Campbell (1996), p.276.