

The Reality of Worship

by

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REALITY, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is the quality of having an actual existence. In this sense it may appear absurd to talk about the reality of worship, since in countless churches up and down the land, day in day out and especially on Sundays, services are being held, and so worship *has* an actual existence ; we can observe it and engage in it, if we are so inclined. But I suspect that when one refers to the reality of worship today, what one is speaking about in fact is its intelligibility and its relevance to human existence, and that, conversely, when modern western man rejects worship as unreal he means that he finds it both unintelligible and irrelevant. I feel bound to say at the outset that I sympathize with this latter attitude ; the more I learn of the forms of worship of the different Christian bodies, the more I find myself compelled to characterize them as esoteric devotions for small coteries divorced from the world. This is a sweeping statement and requires some justification.

It was one of St. Paul's liturgical principles that everything said or sung during a service should be understandable not only by the members of the Christian community but even by outsiders. ' If ', he wrote to the Corinthians, ' I do not know the meaning of the sound the speaker makes, his words will be gibberish to me, and mine to him '. (I Cor. 14. 11, N.E.B.) Further, ' If you bless with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying ? If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad ? ' (I Cor. 14. 16, 23, R.S.V.) Paul was of course referring to glossolalia, but his thesis is quite plain : whatever language is used must be meaningful. It does not require much comparative study to be aware that most Churches have long ceased to follow Paul in this matter. An extensive list of words, phrases and sentences could easily

be compiled which only survive in liturgical use and are no longer part of the living language of man today. This is true even of those Churches that do not have fixed forms of liturgy, since their *patois* is usually modelled upon archaic translations of the bible.

We must recognize that this vocabulary often relates to concepts that are no longer intelligible. The old ontological way of thinking (about what a thing *is*) has given way to a functional manner of thinking (about what a thing *does*). Such Hellenistic ideas as God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence refer to qualities of being which we today do not really understand, yet it is often this manner of thought that has found expression in our forms of worship, while the really fascinating insights into what God has done and is doing in history are left out.⁽¹⁾ The point I am seeking to make can be conveniently summarized in the words of one of the recommendations in the *Report of the Theological Commission on Worship*, 1963, to the Faith and Order Conference of the World of Churches.

The Church's traditional worship is frequently expressed in an inherited language and world view which modern man regards as belonging to the mythology of a past generation. Such language and such ideas do not, it is claimed, correspond to any objective reality, and are largely unintelligible to those who live within the modern technical and scientific culture. Thus the whole traditional pattern of worship seems to constitute a serious obstacle to any attempt by the Church to confront modern man with the challenge of the gospel.

We therefore recommend to the Faith and Order Conference that it should promote further study of the problems arising from this discrepancy between the biblical world-view and the language of liturgical tradition on the one hand, and the contemporary language and world-view on the other.⁽²⁾

Persistence in employing outdated words and concepts reinforces the impression that worship is an activity of an in-group and has little to do with the contemporary world, for a really outward looking community would presumably not cling to its own dialect but would seek to express itself in the common speech of mankind. Indeed it is difficult to deny that most acts of worship are essentially Church-centred. An examination of many service books reveals that the majority of prayers are for the Christian community, i.e., the Church

(1) A. van den Heuvel, *The Humiliation of the Church*, 1967, pp. 85.f. (2) p. 22.

assemblies to pray for itself ; the ' real ' world, as modern man sees it, seldom falls within its purview.⁽¹⁾ Consequently, to many, worship has an air of unreality, which is often intensified by what is actually done.

There are Churches in which wafers are used at the communion service ; there are Churches where a non-alcoholic beverage is consumed ; there are Churches where no drink whatsoever is given to the congregation at the eucharist or where a mere moistening of the lips is deemed sufficient. What kind of world is this ? Is it not a world of make-believe, where bread is not bread, wine is not wine and drinking is not drinking ?

Both language and action declare that worship is something apart and that to engage in it is to move out of the secular world into a sacred one which is ecclesio-centred. Our church buildings proclaim the same message : they are holy shrines which must be reserved exclusively for cultic performances by the Christian community and must be guarded from profanation by worldly activities. This means that the problem of the reality of worship is not simply that of bringing archaic words, actions and concepts, up to date ; it goes much deeper than that. The problem is to rediscover the unity of the sacred and the secular, or, in more theological terms, to acknowledge the Christological basis of worship. The reality of worship is indeed the reality of Christ in whom sacred and secular are one.

Much of our worship however rests upon the unbiblical and erroneous idea of the two worlds. Reality is divided into two spheres, the one sacred and Christian, the other profane and secular, and these two are conceived as opposed and mutually repellant. Worship belongs to the sacred or supernatural sphere, everyday life to the natural or secular sphere. Thus only as one separates oneself from the latter can one fully engage in the former. Hence man is presented with the possibility of existence in one or other of these two realms ; he can either lead a spiritual life which has no part in secular existence, or he can follow his secular calling which is entirely autonomous. So he abandons reality as a whole and places himself in one or other of the two distinct spheres ; he seeks Christ without the world or the world without Christ. He is encouraged to do this by the forms that Christian worship has adopted. But to acknowledge Christ is to recognize that his reality comprises the reality of the world within itself. ' Just as in Christ the reality of God entered into the reality

(1) J. G. Davies, *Worship and Mission*, 1967, pp. 150ff.

of the world, so, too, is that which is Christian to be found only in that which is of the world,'⁽¹⁾ for in Christ the sacred and the secular are united.

One of the great emphases of modern Christological thought is upon the full humanity of Jesus. Whatever else he is, he is, in Bonhoeffer's phrase, 'the man for others'. I would not wish to suggest that this is an exhaustive description of the person of Christ, but no description can be regarded as adequate that does not include at least this. This means that cultic introversion and cultic apartheid, i.e., worship for ourselves apart and not for others, is unChristian. It also means that the reality of worship must at the very least be a human reality in all its secularity. I must also go on to say that I believe that it is primarily in and through human reality that one encounters God. I know God through Christ, i.e., through and not apart from the man Jesus, and I also know Jesus through my personal communion with others, in whom he, as the divine image, is present. So man is for man the way to God. Any form of worship therefore which obscures the contemporary human reality, either because it speaks in the vocabulary and thought forms of second or sixteenth century man or is overlaid with the transcendental trappings of some holy realm other than the world in which we live and move and have our being, cannot but be irrelevant because it does not relate to the human condition as we know it.

But how can we relate our worship to that condition so that those of us Christians who are mature men and neither infantile nor throw-backs to a bygone era may play our part in it with joy and liberation? The answer is not to be found, as so many Churches appear to think, in the setting up of liturgical commissions consisting of 99% ordained ministers with a conditioned knowledge of the history of worship. If the work is to be done adequately, and it will be a never ending task, we have to seek the assistance of social anthropologists to describe for us the ritual patterns of modern life; we have to enlist the sociologists to disclose to us the real face of contemporary society; we need the help of secular makers of liturgy—dramatists, theatrical producers, journalists, etc.—to discover worldly forms for our worship.⁽²⁾ I am not equipped to fulfil any of these specialist rôles; but it is possible for me to make some phenomenological observations which may point the way forward, while recognizing

⁽¹⁾ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Fontana ed., 1964, p. 198.

⁽²⁾ cf. *The Church for Others*, 1967, p. 42.

that that way can only be adequately charted with the full co-operation of the experts I have just listed.

Whenever the Church has been true to its biblical inheritance, it has taken its agenda from the contemporary world. Since authentic theology arises from an interplay of the gospel and the world, we have to take the world seriously ; we have to take its questions to heart ; we have to let it tell us what its agenda is so that we can write the gospel into it. This was the procedure adopted by the early Christians, and indeed by Christ himself, when he and they created our first liturgical forms. When the early Christians celebrated the communion service they would appear to have repeated the Last Supper *in toto*. They began with a blessing, breaking and distribution of bread ; then followed the meal, and they ended with a blessing and the distribution of wine. So they took their liturgical practice from the world of Judaism—the pattern of a meal. Just as the Jewish father in his home began a meal by saying grace over a loaf, breaking and distributing it, so did the leader of the family of Christians. And just as the Jewish father at the Passover meal explained what he was doing in terms of God's action at the Exodus, so Christ first, and after him his representatives, accompanied the familiar actions with an explanation : This is my body . . . this is my blood. The agenda of the world was accepted and its inner meaning made clear, as the early Christians gathered around a table in the house of one of their fellow members. This was over 1900 years ago. If we adopt this same approach now, then we have to consider the phenomenology of the meal at the present day, and then, in the light of this, decide what re-structuring of our eucharist meal is called for. We are in fact seeking the human reality of a meal in order that that may provide the basis of the reality of our eucharistic worship. The type of meal I propose to examine is the family meal on formal occasions, i.e., not the everyday lunch or dinner but the feasts, if you like, with which a family, together with some friends, observe birthdays and similar anniversaries.

In most households a meal usually begins with the hand-round of bread to be eaten with the first course, e.g., with the soup. In England this is likely to be in the form of either complete rounds from a pre-sliced loaf or pieces cut according to taste from a loaf on the table. Sometimes crusty French bread may be provided and since this is a family occasion and one does not stand on ceremony, it is likely that, as in France itself, this kind of loaf will simply be broken into chunks by

hand. The bread in any case is passed round on a plate or board and each helps himself.

The next common item is the provision of wine. If a red wine is being served, this may have had the cork drawn beforehand and it may have been decanted ; if a white suits the menu, it is likely to be brought from the frigidaire and the cork pulled. After tasting it to see if it is in good condition, the father, or one of the family at his request, will fill the glasses. The first drink is usually taken together and, since this is a special occasion, a toast will probably be called for. During this time conversation is taking place, and this should not be a monologue by the father, otherwise he is likely to bore the others, nor will the contributions be primarily didactic and, since some friends are present, it would be rude to indulge in a private language or swap family jokes in which others cannot share.

To this pattern may be added two features from other kinds of contemporary meals represented by Rotary club lunches or dining club dinners. These invariably begin with a grace and end with the reading of a paper and a discussion upon it. It may be said that a grace is merely a superstitious survival ; it is however very tenacious—at none of the secular meals I attend, whether a sailing club annual dinner or the meetings of a graduates' club, would they think of beginning without one—and in any case an expression of gratitude is not unbecoming civilized adults.

The meal thus described is clearly to be distinguished from those taken in a cafeteria, where one frequently eats alone and at one's own pace. Such a meal is a convenient modern device for obtaining individual sustenance quickly, but it has little to do with fellowship, whereas a family meal is essentially an occasion for expressing and experiencing fellowship, unity, a sense of community, love and, unless one is very self centred, outgoing concern.

Here then is the human reality of the meal—what does it suggest for our eucharistic worship at the present day ?

The structure may be summarized as follows :

1. Grace.
2. Sitting down at table.
3. Taking of bread and preparation for distribution, if not pre-sliced, by cutting or breaking.
4. Helping oneself to bread.
5. Eating bread.
6. Taking of wine.

7. Pouring of wine into glasses.
8. Toast.
9. Drinking of wine.
10. Address.
11. Discussion.

If this structure is now re-expressed in terms of the eucharist, we obtain the following outline :

1. All standing, a prayer of thanksgiving, during the course of which God is blessed, and the absent members of the family unable to be present and all those in need are remembered.
2. All sit round the table.
3. The president, or family head, takes the bread and breaks or cuts it according to local usage.
4. A plate is passed round containing the bread and each helps himself.
5. The bread is eaten together.
6. The president takes the wine.
7. The wine is poured into the several glasses.
8. A prayer is offered, being a further blessing of God.
9. The wine is drunk by all together.
10. There is a sermon.
11. There is a concluding discussion.

It will be obvious that this pattern does not correspond with any eucharistic service celebrated at the present day ; some of its features are found in some Churches but no Church has every one. We normally have the address or sermon at the beginning and not at the end and seldom does any discussion follow. We do not generally sit around a table, although it was the practice in former days in Scotland and is still so in some Dutch Reformed Churches. We do not help ourselves to the bread but have it given to us, as if we were not adults but children. In many churches, though not in all, we drink or sip out of a single wine glass or chalice and, completely oblivious of hygiene, we do not have separate ones. In those Churches where individualism is rife and the corporate or transpersonal nature of the community is not appreciated, the impression given is that of a help-yourself-cafeteria. Where large congregations are concerned, as in Roman Catholic churches, only a small proportion of those present know each other. Conversation, in the sense of a dialogue, is lacking, monologue being the norm ; the prayers, especially those that stem from the Reformation, are excessively didactic, and the language is full of allusions and

terms which only the initiated of long standing can appreciate. It is little wonder that the human reality of our worship has been lost.

I am not suggesting that this pattern should be immediately adopted by all Churches for the celebration of the eucharist. Where *public* worship is concerned, involving large numbers, some degree of stylisation is essential. There are however two dangers: the adaptation may obscure the character of the celebration as a meal, and the numbers involved, especially in relation to the traditional parish structures, will make it impossible for more than a minority of those present really to know one another. This suggests that we shall only recover the human reality of the eucharistic meal when it is celebrated in small groups—in house, factories, offices, etc. Such pluriform observance however will pose acutely the problem of integration. To preserve the unity of the Christian fellowship, it will probably be necessary to have occasional celebrations in large cathedral-type buildings attended by the separate groups so that, by means of a more stylised rite, they may experience and express their unity in Christ.

In suggesting such a programme, I am aware that I am proposing something that is contrary to what many have believed to be the ideal of Christian worship, viz. the regular weekly celebration of communion by all the members of a local church together in one place. This was the ideal of the Reformers; it has also inspired the Parish Communion Movement in the Church of England and indeed it is generally accepted wherever the modern Liturgical Movement has shed its influence. But is it any longer possible of realization? Is it not an agenda devised by the Church for itself, which is rapidly becoming irrelevant to the agenda that the world is pursuing?

In seeking an answer to these questions, we cannot avoid a brief examination of the society in which we live and of the extent to which it differs from society in the past. In centuries gone by the form of the parish was determined by the shape of society characterized by its division into small, closely co-ordinated, comparatively isolated communities. While social change did take place, difficulties of mobility ensured that they were largely internal changes within the parish area, and the Church was able to minister to the area by adapting its local structures in the same way. In this village-type situation most of the inhabitants knew one another, at work and at leisure, and the weekly eucharist was a

vital focus of their community life. But social change has now gathered such momentum that it is sweeping away all the old landmarks. There is discernible an overall trend in modern western life which is leading to the breakdown of the congregation-type based upon residence—the parish is no longer the world of the individual labourer or professional man. In work and leisure he is mobile ; with the five-day week and the car he is often away at the week-end ; his social life is no longer confined to those who occupy the houses next door or live in the same street. Wherever this situation exists, a congregation based upon residence is something of an anomaly. The village community *is* passing away, indeed *has* passed away in many areas, and with it the associated ideal of a weekly *parish* communion. If the Church persists in regarding the parish as its basic unit and its corresponding pattern of worship as the norm, it will in fact be treating urbanized man as if he were still an inhabitant of a mediaeval village and the worship it arranges will correspondingly have an air of unreality. If however the Church accepts the kind of programme I have outlined, it will be endorsing a pluriform pattern for a pluriform society. Moreover it will also be moving towards a new definition of congregation.

In society as it is today we should see the congregation as a gathering of ministries, rather than as a collectivity of individuals and families. It is a coming together of ministering fellowships in community. These fellowships find their primary centres in factory, shop, office, etc., but are enabled to experience their interdependence in the congregation, i.e., in the community of ministries, which assembles only occasionally.

Congregational worship of the old type becomes less real in the twentieth century. Those of us who have been brought up in it and those who have been trained and ordained to sustain it cannot but witness this phenomenon with some feelings of nostalgic regret, but the realities of the contemporary situation should prevent us attempting the vain task of restoring an era which is passing away. That era was after all something of an oddity, at least from the biblical perspective. Bonhoeffer has shown us, in his short study entitled *Living Together*, that we cannot take it for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians. He sees Christians as a people of dispersion, scattered like seeds throughout the world. This is their curse and promise. ‘God’s people,’ he says, ‘must dwell in far countries . . . but it will be the seed of the Kingdom of God in

the world.'⁽¹⁾ He goes on to point out that the ultimate bringing together will not take place until the final consummation.

Until then, God's people remain scattered, held together solely in Jesus Christ, having become one in the fact that, dispersed among unbelievers, they remember *Him* in the far countries. So between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and Sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing.⁽¹⁾

So far then from regarding the coming together as the norm, it is rather the exception. Within the western *Corpus Christianum* this order was reversed ; the exception became the norm. Lacking any vital missionary perspective, the Church triumphant here on earth came to regard its mass not as an anticipation of the messianic banquet, when they *shall* come from the north, south, east and west, but as an actualization of that banquet. Today we have to accept the exception once more, as a foretaste of the *eschaton* without expecting or forcing its realisation here and now. So the ideal of a weekly celebration of the communion by all the members of the local church together in one place is neither possible nor to be expected. This is the situation for which we have to plan, and it is with this in mind that I have made my tentative proposals.

Clearly more is involved in eucharistic revision than a simple re-organization of times and places and a mere acceptance of the pattern of twentieth century meals. We have to investigate the extent to which the eucharistic meal must necessarily be stylized ; we have to achieve a delicate balance between fixed and flexible elements. Certain fixed elements may be regarded as necessary for two reasons : first to avoid chaos and second to provide a basic diet of formal worship which transcends the unaided self-expression of the individual or group and so assists him or it to mature and develop. Flexibility is required in order that spontaneity should not be made impossible from the outset. We have to consider ways of making our acts of worship dialogical, thus setting them free from the monological mould in which they have for too long been confined. We have to assist the worshippers to encounter God in their person to person communion and not

(¹) 1954, p. 8.

apart from it. In other words, we have to ensure that what we do serves the goal of humanization. To explain this last term I cannot do better than quote from *The Church for the World*, which is the report of the North American Working Group on 'The Missionary Structure of the Congregation'.

We have lifted up humanization as the goal of mission because we believe that more than others it communicates in our period of history the meaning of the messianic goal. In another time the goal of God's redemptive work might best have been described in terms of man turning towards God rather than in terms of God turning towards men. The structures of the Church, including its architectural structures, could be understood by the world as means, as pointers to that goal; and man understood, whether he accepted it or not, that his future lay in that movement towards God. The fundamental question was that of the true God, and the church responded to that question by pointing to him . . . Today the fundamental question is much more that of *true* man, and the dominant concern of the missionary congregation must therefore be to point to the humanity in Christ as the goal of mission.⁽¹⁾

Worship which is not completely related to the human reality cannot assist in the achievement of this goal. Finally, in directing attention to work still to be done, I must re-emphasize the need to seek the assistance of the social anthropologist, the sociologist, etc. However, in the approach I have outlined there may be the beginning of a recovery of the human and therefore Christocentric reality of the sacrament. Without this, it is, not to put too fine a point on it, so much mumbo-jumbo, cut off from life in the world and to that extent unreal. If Christ is to be known in the breaking of the bread, then this must be done in accord with the pattern of human behaviour today.

Have I forgotten the transcendent? I do not think so, for me the transcendent is known in and through the immanent.⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ *The Church for Others and The Church for the World*, 1967, p. 78.

⁽²⁾ I have concentrated in this paper on the eucharist as the central and primary act of worship for Christians. There are of course other ways of worshipping of a non-sacramental character; for a fascinating account of how these may be devised today see W. Hollenweger, 'The Producer as Liturgist', *Monthly Letter about Evangelism*, No. 2/3, Feb./March, 1967.