

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WORSHIP

The non-clerical author has asked to be described simply as 'a voice from the pew', wishing that this article be read for what it contains, and without the preconceptions which might creep in through the disclosure of a household name in Church circles.

INTRODUCTION

In every church, there should always be at least one service every week to which Christians can feel it is safe to bring non-Christians, and 'oncers' will desire to come again. Attention to a few simple points could make almost any form of service really to the glory of God and the salvation of men. The main problem is that focus on what is done is useless without emphasis on how it is done. (Anything can be done badly, and most things can be done well.)

The basic reason for a variety of forms of worship is that God has made us a variety of people and delights in variety; heaven does not just have harps as commonly supposed even in our attitude that 'unity' means 'uniformity'. Social class and education and intelligence and personality and aesthetic taste and past experience are determinants of whether we love Latin chants or Hallelujahs, equate organs with religion or with 'kists of whistles', mourn old hymnbooks or want ten-word choruses.

BUT if there are going to be any newcomers in the church, it is not gimmicks or forms of words that will bring them in, but thoughtfulness about their needs to hear the Gospel and find God when they first visit. I rather disagreed with the Editorial in the Autumn 1984 issue of the RECORD; I would have wedding guest-lists as large as the couple wanted, because then there are more to have a chance of discovering something of what the Christian religion and the Christian message is about through the marriage service. A free chance for the minister. They've asked for it. (And one of the best evangelistic opportunities is preparation of the couple and even teaching about the service so that even their own ideas make spiritual sense. If there are later difficulties, it can then surely be to the minister that they return for help.)

So while the Church Service Society prepares liturgies and prayers for services of the faithful and for special occasions, I think that today every emptying church needs one service a week with the 99 lost sheep in mind (who may even be regular attenders) who need help in how to pray and how to sing and how to understand the

Bible reading and hymn words, and what to do the rest of the week after they go out the door. They do not come to church ready to worship God and confess and repent, as conventional openings assume; the service itself is an opportunity to help them to do so, and for this the conventional order of service needs to be turned on its end, and the current pattern of preaching needs to change and BEGIN FIRST with what really needs to be said, before the hard of listening tune out, having heard all the negative stuff everywhere already.

There are many surveys about religion. The one that is needed is the practical one of asking attenders about what they have understood of the service and what they have not, before they go home. This is really putting into practice that 'the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath'. A church service is to enable man to worship God; the psychology of worship is how this can be done.

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What is 'congregational participation' in worship? How is the priesthood of all believers shown in worship? Surely it is not just repeating responses set down for them to repeat. What follows describes services of worship from the aspect of the participants in the pew - what is their liturgy?

If public worship is to be to the glory of God, then to whom is that glory to be shown?

Here love of neighbour and love of God are not divided. The glory of God can be shown in public worship.

Today there is good reason for two sorts of church services - one for when all attenders are the faithful for whom the present liturgies are designed and familiar, and one other for when there is a need to reach and teach the Casual, the Cool, the Unknowing, the visiting Tourist and the Newcomers. Traditional worship services assume that the people have come prepared by daily lives of private prayer and Bible reading, and with their hearts prepared for worship - to jump off with the starting gun, so to speak.

But for Casual, Cool, and the Stranger, these liturgies are back to front. They have come unready to start by praising and adoring and confessing. They may bring a debris of complaints, accusations and needs instead.

Every act that happens then in the church is a sign, symbol and parable to them; the action is as important as the words, and part of the Word preached to them.

Think through, then, the Psychology of Worship, for a church where the worship is

an evangelical witness. How can new attenders or old routiners be prepared to seek or find God? How can a church service be to the glory of God before men?

I would like to put some thoughts up for discussion and testing out, about an 'Everyman Liturgy' (that is generic and not gender-specific.)

1. The Entry. This begins at the church steps. Most churches know how to welcome visitors at the door, and to garland the porch with signs of Christian life, with invitations to join in, and if possible, a poster that sets out the Christian faith for the ignorant. Today far more people outside the church are upset if they feel no welcome, than come wanting to speak to nobody.

Any church service leaflets provided include permanent information, and a prayer help for the coming week, to make them worth keeping, and not almost immediately litter and waste.

2. Opening devotion. A permanent card at every seat suggests what you can do while waiting for a service to begin, to prepare yourself. There is also a welcome card, with a tear-off half to leave name and address if you are a visitor, newcomer, or want help; and the other half, to take away, is a welcoming card with church information on one side, and an everyday prayer on the reverse.

The Faithful may be praying or chatting and being friendly. If there is music, it is the tunes of hymns that will be sung, so that people will be able to sing the better. Remember that often one lot of people come to church because they like 'churchy' music and the other lot are helped to stay away because they don't like it, and it is a pity that aesthetics can be an initial barrier, particularly for the young. 'Suitable' music is often very distracting rather than an aid to devotion and it can be easier to hear and pray in silence.

3. Call to worship. A brief call that welcomes all and states the aims of the service, leading into a rousing hymn, sung well. If it is not being sung well, I know of ministers who will call for a new start - and the congregation welcome the chance. If it can't be sung well, look to the possible reasons:-

A small congregation without a good choir to lead it usually cannot sing to organ music. The average woman finds the melody line pitched too high and squeaks on all the higher notes, and the average man can't find how to sing lower; both tend to drag and the organ goes slower trying to keep back and everyone longs for the fourth verse to end. Singing was introduced because people like making a joyful noise to the Lord - but they need help to be able to do it. Everyone can sing when there are lusty singers to lead and then the organ can pound forth.

Otherwise, a guitar or ensemble is good, or unaccompanied singing given the first note or lines with known tunes. A small group of people sitting together will often sing better unaccompanied than they will when letting an organ do it all for them - and enjoy their singing more because they can hear their words, not drowned out by the organist. For unfamiliar tunes or apparently hopeless congregation, use taped singing of good large mixed voice choirs with strong men's voices in them. This is far cheaper than an organ as well as more versatile, and people who deliberately stay away from organs are not the only ones who like singing with tapes. The psychology of community singing is that most people want to have a good sing, but need help and even apparent bullying to do it. The first hymn is announced - as all the hymns are - with one sentence explaining what the hymn is about. This draws people's attention to the words of what they are going to sing and why they are singing it. One reason for mumbling is that the hymn is just going through the motions, part of the ritual hour. It is also important today to draw attention to the words of hymns and their meanings, as the trend to reduce meaning in hymns to the absolute minimum slogan is trivialising.

If the congregation are scattered in ones and twos, the first hymn is a good time to call them all to come together to the front. This is highly symbolic, calling the scattered sheep of Israel, and the people's response is also highly symbolic, full of meaning. It is also highly practical, because when people are together, psychological factors operate that makes them a congregation, spiritually and psychologically open to each other and the Spirit. It also makes it possible to sing.

In a service just for the Faithful, individual piety and isolation is more permissible, and 'togetherness' can be safely avoided - there are times to be alone, even in church. In services for the Faithful alone it may be fair enough for the minister to prefer a safe distance when preaching, - to think it is better for him to be able to see all the distant faces than for the people to be able to see him, or for him to be able to see familiar ghosts as if they still sat in all the empty spaces.

But when there are strangers and once-comers, the message conveyed by all the apparently lonely and unfriendly people sitting apart like the lost characters in C.S. Lewis' The Great Divide is unfortunately, "Get lost yourself". Scattered people in a congregation that is not all faithful leads to further disintegration.

It may seem to take forever to train even the Faithful to sit at the front, but it

should be possible to train them not to sit on the aisle to keep out others, and to sit with strangers when they see them. There seems to be a 'publican' within all of us, or a need to take literally Jesus' story about taking a low place at the banquet - and be called up to the front places. Very well, call us up, even if it can't be until the Sunday school children are leaving. There are quite a few hymns suitable for singing while everyone moves up together. (See Appendix for some examples.)

The social psychology of the size of the congregation. There are group dynamics and practical reasons why a large crowded congregation does well with a fine organ and fine pulpit preaching - but if that congregation sits decimated around the amphitheatre, the same techniques are like empty ritual, to the stranger.

Psychologically, a small congregation that sits together at the front can be spiritually rejuvenated and inspired by their closer and more direct contact with each other and nearness to the central action. The minister can look his people in the face and speak directly to them about what he knows they need as individuals; he can sit in a chair by the communion-table and teach them, and find out 'where they are at'. Many sermons preached in pulpits are written in studies with none of the real faces in mind. (Why impress poor Mrs Bodge with the fate of the nation, when you know she is near breaking point?) You can know if the people are listening to you, or just waiting for you to stop - and you can do something about it.

The first and short prayer asks for grace to listen and meet God. This is also a possible time for the 'prayer that sums it all up', the Lord's Prayer, with the people asked to listen to what they have been taught to pray.

Then jump in with the Word of God. Make sure those who read it have known beforehand the meaning of what they are reading, so they will read the meaning and not elocute. Each reading is given an introduction, (never more than two sentences or verbosity may take over) and after each reading, there is one sentence of concluding explanation, plus a repetition of where it comes from in the Bible, so that even the ignorant once-comer can look it up again if it interested them. If there is a verse worth knowing by heart in the readings, repeat it, and recommend learning it. It is absolutely necessary for people today to know some the Scriptures by heart, to keep in their hearts for everyday and for time of trouble. That is the reason why the public scripture readings should be in modern translation where the old needs explanation, but insert the marvellous old translations for verses where the poetry can reach everyone, and can be remembered, as dull prose cannot. (The letter kills, indeed, but the Spirit gives life. And Solomon in all his glory is arrayed as King Solomon dressed in his best clothes is not. St. Paul needs a mixture of A.V. poetry and modern speech.)

Then a short hymn (eight lines?) with a meaning which links reading and sermon and gives a chance for physical preparation for the sermon. Again, the hymn has a one-sentence introduction.

Then, the sermon, as a lead-in, not a climax, as it once was, in the days before TV and the other sources of drama. (If there has to be Sunday School overlap, then the children come in later. Although, again psychologically, the evening is often a freer time for newcomers to be open to the influence of the fellowship, and the message of a service, which can then sink during the night as well.) This sermon is not the work of art that might be prepared for the faithful, because is really out to teach and explain and present 'what it is all about', taking off by explaining what the Scripture readings mean for the Christian's daily life - for we are Jeremiah, we are Lazarus.

The sermon can follow the structure of a series - such as a two-year journey through the whole Bible, linking every chapter with the Christian gospel and with the Christian life of everyone there, or the Christian year, bringing in the heroes of the faith also to exemplify 'lively doctrine'. Ten minutes is about the longest once-comers are able to listen today. Sometimes five minutes at a time is better, with breaks, but the final two minutes summarises the whole again, as a teaching device.

The rule for preaching today to listeners with short attention spans is START WITH WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY. Get in quickly. Say it. Then explain it very clearly. Then sum it up and end with a rousing burst almost as short as a slogan, so that everyone can remember whatever positive impulse you are emphasising.

IT IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL that the sermon is not negative. This is extremely difficult to do today, with its negative compulsions and conformities in the whole of society, to make the modern substitution of Hell Now rather than Hell Fire later. You may find yourself so conditioned that you can only avoid the trap by 1. Write your sermon. 2. Then cut out all the negatives about how awful the church is and how awful the world is, or what you suppose Jesus is mistakenly stereotyped as. Or take the negatives from the start, where they probably are, and substitute one sentence about how awful the world is and hide it somewhere in the middle for when people are less attentive. Then you should have a good - and short, sermon. There is absolutely no need to preach from the pulpit about how awful the church is or how misguided other Christians are.

Keep to your own positive emphasis on what you preach as the Good News, never mind anybody else's mistakes, and your own 'guidedness' should shine without need of foil, or undue publicity for ideas you wish to be disregarded.

The common structure for a bad sermon today is

1. To start with how awful the world is, or worse, a saying that people think that the church/Jesus/a Christian is (something wet/awful).
2. Later, perhaps half way through, the message of the Gospel comes in supposedly as the trump card. "But..." But by then it is too late. Almost everyone has tuned out, and isn't listening any more. It can be hard to realise that most people in pews can be sitting there not listening, habitually not listening, but if you do become aware of this, then you can stop it.

Worse still, for negative openings, the Freudian assertion is quite true, that in the unconscious mind, information is registered without yes/no tags. If you say, "The church is not a private club of performing seals" then people will go away with the church linked in their minds with performing seals. And I have only used that example because it does not matter if in the future you have that particular link permanently made. Other associations are more damaging. In raising stereotypes about the Church, Jesus or Christians, in order to denounce the stereotypes as false, the clergy have done more to perpetuate and publicise them than any other group in society.

The rule for preaching today is, "Start with what you really think needs saying in presenting the Gospel to the pagan world and the struggling sheep." And today as people need to be taught their Bibles from scratch, a chapter may make a better base than a single text.

By the end of the short sermon, (timed from your observation of congregational stamina) everyone should be in a better frame of mind to start worshipping. So a very short prayer of supplication can lead into a prayer of general confession, 'the things we have done and the things we have not done' and very short silent reflection, before the minister speaks of God's forgiveness, - without the conventional Scottish lists of self-accusation that have driven so many away because they a) do not recognise the specific sins as their own and b) because the service seems to be taken up so much more with this form of concentration on self than on a vision of God. Show that vision of God to the people, and in that light our own darkness is visible to us and we can make our own private confessions in the silence, knowing ourselves what we have done and what we have left undone - with personal help if that is available and necessary too. It is, of course, not a bad idea to have a Day of Repentance now and then, as in Lent, which does focus hard and clear and deliberately, but the common custom

of starting off with groans about our lack of good works and descriptions of supposed inner attitudes is self-defeating. Why, after the detailed opening breastbeating, instead of then rushing out to repent and make good, the people then just sit through the rest of the service and emerge comfortable again, untouched.

It's very hard for most people to follow along with much public prayer. It is more effective to have only one prayer that is longer than one sentence, followed by 15 seconds silence so that the congregation actually have a chance to pray it, than to turn prayers into an indirect sort of sermon to the people or a deal of explanation to God - which many people think is the only sort of prayer, so they do not know how to pray privately at all.

'Congregational participation' is not helpful for once-comers by readings or prayers with responses. There are the responses, and they are said, but the people have had no chance to think about them or agree in their hearts to say them. It is pure formality. There are marvellous prayers which are worth knowing and even saying together (although people speaking them together do sound like a lot of sheep) such as Common Prayer collects, or the prayers of St. Francis or St. Patrick, so that the words can stay in our hearts at other times as well - but most 'orders of service' are not of that style or calibre at all. They bore, alas.

A prayer of intercession, straightforward, - without any 'so thats' or detailed pictures, can be followed by collection - or the parish news can follow - 'intimations' and 'notices' are formal jargon for the stranger. And it includes news that makes it clear that people in the parish care and are cared for, and that the minister knows and cares also. Someone from the congregation may speak a few sentences about their own special concerns and how others can benefit, share and pray too. And so people get to know each other - the workers, pensioners, children, teenagers. The collection can then follow - once-comers do not realise if there is a collection box in the porch and by now they have some idea of what is going to happen to the money - and during the collection people can chat together. By now there is plenty to chat about, and strangers can be spoken to personally. Those who like contact - and many do and some do not, can shake hands with the sign of peace.

The dedication can be sung, and the intercessory prayer that follows for local needs and thanks is a short list, requiring no elaboration; it is the sincerity that communicates.

The sermon then returns to finish what was begun before, linking it with the Christian's life and calling that is for everyone with something about prayer and reading for the week ahead. By now the spirit of worship has had a chance to enter the hearts that came into the church, at first unready and possibly irritable or depressed. Now is the time for the final words of the sermon as a prayer, to launch everyone into a great hymn of praise, thanksgiving and adoration.

The sermon then sums up, leading into the whole life of worship and action for the Christian life in the coming week.

Then with the blessing, where sung response could now be fitting, and finally, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," and the formal worship ends. This is the time for the musicians to let themselves go and thoroughly enjoy whatever they like enjoying, after being so considerate of the congregation until then. They are now setting their own example for the congregation that the new week, the renewal, has started.

And while the Faithful may like to go off quietly in their own meditations after a service for the Faithful, this Open service does not really finish until every stranger has received a smile and a welcome, and possibly a cup of coffee as well. Now the people meet each other, and take up friendships, and perhaps even eat together, at the church or in each others' homes.

Most liturgies are in fact designed primarily to be what the designer would like to have as a liturgy. This order of service is of course no exception - but I am deliberately representing all those who come to a 'service for the Faithful' and feel quite out of what is going on, and not sure if anything is. Their lives and thinking have been so different from what the Old Faithful take for granted, that they need as much help as possible to 'get something' out of the service. Because the 'something' they can get is what they need desperately today, and what the Church exists to give.

It may go without saying that all special services, including baptisms, confirmations of new members, special celebrations of any sort, special turn-outs of organizations and clubs, except perhaps for ordinations, should all have the Everyman liturgy, rather than the liturgy of the faithful. Even (?) communion days can offer the opportunity of a 'converting sacrament' (Wesley's word for it, and he knew well.)

It might be found that many of the Faithful too would appreciate the chance to understand more about what is going on in worship, rather than very often moving through the motions of a ritual that is sleepy and comfortable because so familiar but not sinking deep at all. How shallow or deep it may have been can be found out by the congregational reaction when it is suggested that an extra service in the week can be run explicitly to help newcomers.

There is no harm in a church having two services that are different. Churches, like everything else in the country today, can be open any day of the week. Like everything else in the country today, they can be open, wide open, on Sundays.

APPENDIX 1

PROCESSIONAL HYMNS

During the singing of any of these hymns, the congregation can move up to sit together in the front seats from their scattered origins. Until the practice is established, someone in a very back seat should be prepared to lead off.

All people that on earth do dwell	Praise to the Lord the Almighty the King
Come let us join our cheerful voice	Come let us to the Lord our God
Come ye faithful raise the strain	Oh come all ye faithful
Approach my soul the mercy seat	O come let us sing unto the Lord
Today I rise	Jesus calls us o'er the tumult
O come and let us to the Lord	Serve the Lord with joy and gladness
All creatures of our God and King	I was glad when they said unto me
Kumbiyah	Lift up your heads
Come ye thankful people come	Songs of praise the angels sang
Come children join to sing	As with gladness men of old
All poor men and humble	Christians awake

(There is also a version of 'From Greenland's icy mountains', only suitable for a young congregation.)

An invocational Hymn Tune adapted from Collins Street, but anyone that fits the metre will do.

From far and near, from shore to shore,
Let hearts awake and hear
Though dark the night, how great the Light,
The King who calles us near.

Alone we bear our private griefs

Scattered like sheep astray,
Our sight unclear, we faintly hear,
And fumble for the way.

Christ in your everlasting grace
Now make my eyes to see,
My ears to hear, my love to bear
Your love to live in me.

Come let us all with cheerful mind
A people now restored
Come now, come forward every soul,
To sing the song of the Lord.

Last verse more joyful and jazzy.

APPENDIX 2

For a Card in the Pews

TO READ WHILE WAITING FOR A SERVICE TO BEGIN

PREPARING FOR WORSHIP: It is possible to hear in church without really hearing, see without really looking, and even to speak about God without listening to what you are saying.

In the silence before a church service begins, it is possible to prepare yourself to fully take part. Try to "wait upon God". Give yourself a few minutes to listen, you may not have had time before to do it.

But this may be only words for you.

You may just feel that you have time to fill in and are not sure what to do or what to think about.

So here are some recommendations about making the most of the stillness.

Read the last page of the Iona book. Find a piece of the Bible you have not read before. Look through the index of the hymn-book for hymns you might like to know.

Look around you - at what is in the church, at the people with you, seeing in your mind the generations before you, back to St Columba and his singing monks.

Try to look further into yourself and your desires and purposes and anxieties, out into the world. Think what your calling may be in it, out, beyond, and through the world. Try to apprehend what our finite brains cannot fully understand - what can be glimpsed but not seen, heard, but has no sound.

If you are grateful for anything think of it. Think of what you could do with your life.

Make notes if you like - it can be worth it.

There may be only a few minutes left. There is still time - to be still, and suddenly to know: "I am God who made you."

REVIEWS

Bryan D. Spinks, From the Lord and 'The Best Reformed Churches'
(Bibliotheca 'Ephemerides Liturgicae', Subsidia 33;
Edizioni Liturgiche, Rome, 1984); 212 pp., L. 28,000

The scope of this study, by an Anglican who is Chaplain of Churchill College, Cambridge, is clarified by the sub-title: 'A study of the eucharistic liturgy in the English Puritan and Separatist traditions 1550-1633'. (It is presented as volume 1; the companion volume, on English Congregationalism, 1645-1980, is published as Freedom or Order? by Pickwick Publications of Pittsburgh, 1984.) The Separatists make only a fleeting appearance, for they were hostile to all forms of written prayer, and evidence of their practice is scanty. Among the Puritans, the story is predominantly one of the use or adaptation of continental rites, for, with the exception of Knox's 1550 liturgy for Berwick-on-Tweed, they 'declined to compile an original or indigenous English Reformed rite'. But