

STANDING FOR THE GOSPEL

A RESPONSE

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The Revd Professor Reid appears to object to standing for (or any other veneration of) the Holy Gospel within the Reformed Tradition on two main accounts,

1. It is against the Reformed concept of worship, and 2. It entails the rejection of what he calls "assured modern scholarship".

With regard to the first point he quotes W. Niesel,

'The essential thing in worship is the action of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ Himself,'

and then goes on to state, "What is important is not anything we do, but only that we make place for him who is worshipped to do" (5.21). Christ acts, he maintains, whether we have ceremonial or not, "whether it is Gospel or Epistle (or even Old Testament lection) that is read".

Surely this is to reduce the worship of the Faithful to a kind of passive waiting; merely listening to a sermon in a receptive spirit. Certainly it is true that in the Reformed Tradition the Preaching of the Word became the dominant feature of public worship, and it is equally true that in the Preaching of the Word Christ acts independently of our ceremonial. But our ceremonial is our preparation for, and our response to, the Preaching of the Word.

Worship is, "*The response of the Church to God's wondrous work of Revelation and Redemption*" (DH Hislop, "Our Heritage in Public Worship", p.1).

"*Word-centred worship comprises both the divine message and the response of the worshipping soul*" (R Will, "Ways of Worship", 1951 p.217). Worship is active, not passive; and our ceremonial, whether it be simply the bowing of

the head and closing of the eyes during prayer, or standing for the singing of psalms and hymns, or the sign of the Cross, or genuflection, or whatever is an important psychological and spiritual part of that worship.

"The 'body-language' of the Church is part of the fulness of offering ourselves to God" (URC "A Book of Services ", p.10)

Furthermore, Christ acts with us in our whole worship, not just in the Preaching of the Word; for our worship is offered to the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is, as Pius XII pointed out,

"rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in its entirety of its Head and Members" (Mediator Dei, 1947)

Part of the reason for the "dismantling of the ceremonial apparatus" within the Reformed Tradition was, I believe, the early separation of the Word from the Sacrament, and the infrequent celebration of the latter.

"The Reformation brings about a total reversal of worship-values and the Word of God comes into its own. Luther still preserves the balance between Word and Sacrament...At Strasbourg Calvin still celebrates Communion in the frame of the dominical service. But little by little Protestantism cuts off the Sacrament from Word-centred worship...In the Reformed Church of Zwingli, Communion is from the beginning eliminated from the regular service. Pietism and rationalism have still further alienated from the Sacrament those influenced by them" (R Will, "Ways of Worship", 1951, p.218).

Sacramental worship is by its nature ceremonial, whilst preaching is by its nature direct and simplistic. Within the Reformed Church there is at last a growing recognition that the separation of Word and Sacrament is a mistake.

"The Lord's Supper is the central, typically Christian act of public worship...as the Universal Church in general and the Reformers in particular have clearly demonstrated, the Lord's Supper should be the principal act of worship Sunday by Sunday" (Church of Scotland "Divine Service", p.iv).

"The normative order for worship in the Reformed Tradition is a service of Word and Sacrament" (URC "A Book of Services" p.10).

"The unit and unity of Congregational worship is the Word and Sacrament together" (John Marsh, "Ways of Worship", 1951 p.153).

"A marked intention to re-introduce Communion into the normal service of each Sunday...can be seen in the Reformed Churches of France, in the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Alsace, and in Germany, Holland and Switzerland" (R Will, "Ways of Worship", 1951 p223).

Where the Sacrament is celebrated as the complement of the Word there is inevitably ritual, for the Communion, even in its simplest form, is a ritual act instituted by our Lord Himself. It is a ceremony re-enacting the central theme of the Gospel. We might say that Christ is proclaimed through the Word, but that He offers Himself in the Sacrament. The Sacrament is the logical complement of the Word.

No celebration of Holy Communion, even within the Reformed Tradition, is valid without the repetition of the Lord's words of Institution. These words, therefore, in a liturgical context, are of greater importance than any other words of Scripture. This fact illustrates the special nature of liturgy. The Gospel narratives, especially those of the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection, are central both to the Preaching of the Word and to the Eucharist: it is only right and fitting, therefore, that within the context of the Churches' worship, they should receive special reverence.

This leads me to Professor Reid's second point, that standing for the Gospel entails rejection of "assured modern scholarship". Modern Biblical criticism is a science which can be engaged in by believer or non-believer alike. In common with all sciences it postulates a series of hypotheses which suit the "facts" as they are known at any given time. These hypotheses might well differ from one school to another, and no hypothesis is sacrosanct; all are subject to revision and even rejection.

Although worship may be studied scientifically, worship itself is not a science, but is an act of the believing community: it belongs to the realm of faith. The basic question of the Biblical critic (Scientist) is: "Did Jesus Christ actually speak the words recorded in the Gospels?" But in the context of the Churches' worship, the basic fact is that from very early times the Gospels were accepted by the Church as (at the least) containing its understanding of what Christ said and did. The Gospel, like worship itself, belong to the realm of faith.

Should some in the Reformed Church choose to venerate the reading of the Holy Gospels as containing the Churches' understanding of what her Lord and Head said and did, by standing or by some other means, this must not be called

"a mischievous development";

even as a return to a weekly celebration of Holy Communion must not be regarded as a mischievous development. The faith of the Church, and her worship which is the expression of that faith, is much more important than Biblical criticism. In the last analysis all religion is a system of belief accepted by faith. How does Professor Reid evaluate the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation, for example, in the light of "assured modern scholarship" ? Such doctrines, like worship, continue from age to age, "in spite" of Biblical criticism, because they are born of faith and minister to faith.

Finally let me add that as there is no tradition of standing in my Church, I read the Prophecy and the Epistle from the Pulpit, but the Holy Gospel from a lectern beside the Holy Table. This gives to the Gospel lection the veneration which I believe it ought to have in the context of worship. Immediately following the reading of the Gospel we sing a Hymn to Christ our Lord, for we do recognize that He is the Living Word to which the Written Word bears record.

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(STANDING FOR THE GOSPEL - FURTHER RESPONSES ?

There are a number of underlying issues to "Ceremonial" to which Professor Reid and then Dr Wright have directed our attention. Let's "stir" this matter further. In my own Church on "High Days" we had a mini Gospel Procession after the reading of the Old Testament Lesson (followed by the Prose Psalm for the Day), the Epistle was read next. Heralded by a "gradual" hymn, and unlike the first two lections which were read from the Lectern on the "south side", the Gospel was read from the Chancel Steps, (the people standing), and was followed by a Fanfare from the Organ. (This was in a URC Church in England).

Our present practice in the School Chapel where we have either two or three lectors (depending upon circumstances) is that the School are usually - though not always - seated for the reading of the Gospel, but sing one of the "Alleluias" from CH3, "Songs of God's People" or Taize. To my mind this heightens the drama of the Gospel lesson.