

REFLECTIONS ON WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

*Presidential Address given by the Reverend Alan D. Birss
at the 2004 AGM of the Church Service Society*

Two young ministers, walking along the Eaglesham road in Renfrewshire, discussing the state of public worship in Scotland, reflecting on a recently published book which had drawn attention to the deplorable standard of worship in the parish churches of Scotland, resolved to pursue actively a suggestion in that book that a society be formed to improve the worship of the church – and so, just two months later, on the 31st of January 1865 *The Church Service Society* was founded in Glasgow. The two young ministers were George Campbell of the Parish of Eastwood and James Cameron Lees, minister of the Second Charge at Paisley Abbey: and the book George Washington Sprott's *The Worship, Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of Scotland* published in Edinburgh in 1863.

Despite the efforts of visionary ministers like Dr. Robert Lee, and of the re-emerging musicians such as Paisley Abbey's R A Smith, precentor from 1807 to 1823, who built up the Abbey choir, or band as it was then known, and wrote settings not only of the psalms but also of the 'Glory be to the Father' and the Sanctus for use in Abbey services, the general standard of public worship in the parish churches of Scotland was deplorable. In his Lee Lecture for 1968, Dr. Stuart Loudon said, 'The situation which he (Robert Lee) found in Scottish Presbyterian worship, at his ordination and induction at Inverbrothock on 10th April 1833; on his translation to Campsie on 5th May 1836; and at his later translation to Old Greyfriars Parish, Edinburgh, on 9th November 1843, was indeed depressing, and to a sensitive and devout spirit, bleak and bare to a forbidding degree. Faith and devotion seemed sadly absent from austere and unadorned sanctuaries where the unaccompanied singing was almost offensively inharmonious, and where wordiness marked formless prayers and apparently endless preaching at rather than to the people!' Indeed, so tedious had the services become that the congregation had to resort to other activities to keep their interest, among which, according at least to the Abbey's records, were scuffles and fights as people jostled to place their stools closest to the huge iron stoves

which provided some form of heating. The physical state of many churches had also reached a low ebb around this time. Cameron Lees describes the interior of Paisley Abbey in the 1850s as being ‘like a vault in a graveyard. Water ran down the walls and an unwholesome smell pervaded every part of the church.’ Services were equally unwholesome. They had no liturgical form: sermons might last an hour and the so-called extempore prayers were, to put it at its most kindly, wordy. Robert Lee himself described many a minister at prayer as ‘plunging on each occasion into a great wilderness of thought and language – like Abraham who went forth not knowing whither he went.’

And Dr. Sprott in his publication *Public Prayers of Yesterday* said that probationer ministers would model their prayers on ‘stock phrases’ from books such as Matthew Henry’s *A Method of Prayer with Scriptural Expressions Proper to be used under Each Head*, or on the remembered prayers of their own parish minister – and that many a newly ordained minister might memorise a prayer of some thirty minutes’ duration which would then serve him throughout his entire ministry. And he gives this wonderful example of part of such a prayer:

‘We bless thee that thou hast cast our lot in a land of light and liberty, and that we can worship under our own vine and fig-tree (so much for the supposed effects of 21st century global warming), none daring to make us afraid. We would set up our Ebenezer and say ‘Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.’ We would come before thee with our hands on our mouths and our mouths in the dust, crying out God be merciful to us sinners.’

Surely a quite remarkable feat to be able to cry out anything with one’s hand over one’s mouth and one’s mouth in the dust. And so it goes on. Herbert Story, who was contacted by Campbell and Cameron Lees after that providential walk near Eaglesham and became one of the three original conspirators of the Society, described the typical worship of the time as ‘an ill-ordered, slovenly, uncertain service... which, wherever it obtruded itself, either blunted all reverential feeling, or drove devotion and culture from the sanctuary which it profaned.’ No wonder, then, that the more cultured of the Established Church’s adherents were deserting her in ever-increasing numbers for the more devotional, ordered and tasteful worship of the non-conforming Episcopal chapels.

Let us fast-forward to 2004. The present day successor of Cameron Lees has not been out walking on the Eaglesham Road – an activity which would lack both the rural charm and safety of Lees’ walk with Campbell – but

the state of worship in the Church of Scotland of the day is still a subject of lively interest and there is a book which has acted as a spur to today's reflections, David Stancliffe's *God's Pattern: Shaping Our Worship, Ministry and Life*, published towards the end of last year by SPCK. David Stancliffe, as many of you will know, is the Bishop of Salisbury and since 1993 has been chairman of the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England. Writing in the preface he says this:

'Much of this book is shot through with my reflections on how we can approach worship with the expectation that something might actually happen there, that we might come face to face with God and be changed (though if you shared that expectation with many of those who go regularly to church, I sometimes suspect they might not go at all!) I mind a lot about worship, and wonder at the quality of what is offered in some places in this most important area of the Church's life. In an age when the standards of public performance are so high, how do worshippers manage to keep on going to church faithfully when the way worship is prepared and offered is often so dire: when it is frequently confused with entertainment, and when it is led by those who apparently have no idea about what they are doing or professional competence in doing it?'

Written from an Anglican perspective – but do not these words ring true within the context of the worship of the Church of Scotland today? And if the result of these reflections is not going to be to round up fellow believers and create a society, for, of course, the society, this society, already exists, then perhaps your retiring president might be allowed to suggest some priorities for the society in our day.

'Worship,' said David Stancliffe, 'confused with entertainment, led by those who apparently have no idea about what they are doing.' We all have anecdotes about services which seem designed more to entertain an audience than to offer worship to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit and of services which have no identifiable shape, in which elements appear to have been cobbled together without any thought to the structure and the flow of the act of worship. It was either last month or the month before that there was an article in the minister's monthly magazine written by a retired minister who had attended a service somewhere or other. Commenting to the minister on the absence of any form of intercession, he was told, 'that's not where we are at here.' I could understand, even if I did not agree with, a response along the lines of, 'well, today was a special service with a particular theme and we decided to drop the intercessions': but to say 'it's not where we're at' implies that intercessory prayer, which has been part of the liturgy from

earliest times, is somehow outdated or not relevant to the weekly morning worship of that particular church. Or again, I heard of a parish recently where the congregation arrived at the church to be told that the service that morning was to be held in the hall: not because the roof of the church had fallen in during the night or the heating had failed, but because they were going to watch the video 'Church without walls' and then discuss it. That was to be the weekly diet of worship in that parish church that Sunday. I am sure that many here today will have similar anecdotes about worship that is not worship in any traditional understanding of that word.

Yet, that having been said, the general standard of worship in Scotland today is nothing like as abysmal as it was in the early and middle part of the 19th century. And for that I think that this Society must claim much credit. The influence of the members of the Society on the generality of the worship of the Church of Scotland would be hard to overestimate. In those early days, while many agreed that something had to be done about the standard of worship, not all agreed as to the method of improvement. While some studied ancient liturgies and sought to relate the practice of the liturgy to a doctrinal understanding of what worship is, others were primarily concerned with what we might call the aesthetics of worship. Their primary concern was not how the church had worshipped in the past, but how the then current formlessness, heaviness and wordiness of services could be replaced with a more gracious, cultured and devotional atmosphere. One such was the aforementioned Robert Lee of Greyfriars himself. Indeed, Dr. Lee seems to have been somewhat suspicious of liturgical scholarship, for he wrote to the founding members of the Church Service Society in 1865: 'I hope you will be prudent and wise, and not take up your time by talking of Greek liturgies, and such far away projects. None who has any tolerable acquaintance with these formularies will imagine that they can furnish anything suitable for us.' Now, as Stuart Loudon says in his 1968 Lee Lecture, this failure to appreciate the history of Christian worship, which meant the practice of judging and formulating on aesthetic premises, had unfortunate effects on subsequent Scottish forms and orders of worship, however greatly they were improved. And the nub of the issue lies in this. A study of liturgy would leave one in no doubt, surely, that not only for the early church and the medieval church but also for the post Reformation Church the distinctive normative act of Christian worship is the Eucharist. A reform of worship which was grounded in the historical development of liturgy would re-establish the communion service as the act of public worship in the parish church Sunday by Sunday.

But if the concern you have is primarily aesthetic, wanting to create a service that is less wordy and unseemly than that which was current, then the form and the shape of the liturgy matters less than the language. And so you look around for worship that is more beautiful and pleasing – and in the context of the middle of the 19th century, that means you look to the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England and in particular to the services of Morning and Evening Prayer which at that time were the principal services in the Church of England's parish worship. So that what developed in the context of improved liturgical worship in the Church of Scotland was a version of Prayer book Matins and Evensong, themselves the Church of England's adaptation of the traditional daily offices of the church – and not a rediscovery of the Eucharistic roots of worship. The shape and pattern of the morning service in the 1940 *Book of Common Order* seems to me to be not of Holy Communion without the sacrament being celebrated but of Morning Prayer (I say this with some hesitation for I am aware that the introduction to the 1990 *Book of Common Order* asserts 'the 1940 *Book of Common Order* was especially rich in its provision of Eucharistic material, keeping the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper central and fundamental'; the preface does state that the Holy Communion is the 'Church's supreme act of worship.' – but the First Order for Morning Service, with the Creed after the New Testament reading and the intercessions after the Creed, with the sermon following, seems to me most akin to Matins in the *Book of Common Prayer*).

The normative nature of Holy Communion in the worship of the church has, of course, been recognised by many for a long time and its restitution to its proper place in the public worship of the Church of Scotland has been the goal of many who seek to hold to the belief that the Church of Scotland is indeed part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. But it was not to be until the 1979 *Book of Common Order* was being produced that the primacy of the service of Holy Communion was strongly asserted in a service book of the church, over a hundred years after the first stirrings of modern liturgical revival. Alistair K Robertson in the preface to 'The Divine Service' which appeared in 1973 as the first instalment of the new *Book of Common Order*, wrote,

'The booklet is entitled *The Divine Service* because the committee is convinced of two things: (1) that the Lord's Supper is the central, typical act of public worship; and (2) that the celebration of the Lord's Supper has historically and doctrinally been so closely allied to the observance of Sunday, that, 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.'

And these sentiments were reiterated in the Introduction to the Book when it appeared in 1979 at the time of Stewart Todd's convenership of the then Committee on Public Worship, where he writes that the Committee envisaged a Book of Common Order in which 'orders for the celebration of Holy Communion would stand first and provision for Morning Service when Holy Communion is not celebrated would follow. This has been done. By this arrangement the Committee gives clear expression to the normative character of the service of word and sacrament which character was undoubtedly recognised by the Reformers as it had been down the centuries by the universal Church.'

Sadly, these words have generally fallen on deaf ears: and for one reason or another the normative nature of Holy Communion for the weekly public worship of the church, which has been achieved in the Church of England over the last century, has not happened here. Now, while the fact that David Stancliffe was moved to make the comments he did about worship in the Church of England suggests that having the Eucharist as the normative act of public worship on a Sunday might not be a panacea for all that is wrong with so much public worship in Scotland today, I do believe that having the celebration of the sacrament weekly as an integral part of the Sunday service would at least restore some form of Christ-centeredness to worship and, hopefully, lessen the tendency of some to see worship either as a form of public entertainment or as a glorified bible study. The Church Service Society should always seek seamliness in worship, but seamliness without an historical and doctrinal understanding of worship is not enough.

I want now to go on to consider three other tendencies in the worship of the church today, which are exacerbated by the lack of a basic Eucharistic pattern to much Sunday worship in Scotland. The first is the seemingly never-ending flow of special occasion Sundays. I'm not referring, of course, to the commemoration of the mighty acts of redemption, but to a wide range of special causes which seem to lay claim to an ever-increasing number of Sundays in the year: Sea Sunday, Unemployment Sunday, Racial Justice Sunday, Prisoners' Sunday. The causes represented are undoubtedly worthy and deserve the consideration of Christian people – but sometimes the material produced for such occasions would seem almost to transform an act of worship into a seminar with hymns. At least if communion were

the goal of the service, then some element of Christ-centeredness in the worship is maintained; but if that is not the case, then like the church which watched the 'Church without Walls' video instead of having a service, there is a possibility, a danger, I would say, that the purpose of worship is forgotten or at least obscured.

The second tendency is one which can be described by a phrase which I think was coined by my predecessor, James Stewart, namely little Scotlandism. While the aforementioned 1940 *Book of Common Order* emphasised in its preface the catholicity of the Church of Scotland and, therefore, its right to, in their words, 'avail itself freely of the precious heritage of devotional literature which... has proved its fitness to survive,' and while John Bell and others have brought, especially to the music of the church, something of the liturgical and musical richness of the world-wide church today, there seems to be among some in our church a desire to emphasise what is different about worship in Scotland rather than what is catholic. So, the argument might go, if the Eucharist is central to the worship of other churches, then it is an expression of our different Scottishness not to have communion central. If a structure and seemliness are important to others, then let there be liturgical anarchy among us. I exaggerate, of course, but I wonder if the general thrust of this observation is one that strikes a chord with others here today. For my part, if a visitor comes to Paisley Abbey and says to me at the end of a service, 'what denomination of church is this? We couldn't quite make up our mind.' I consider that a great compliment. Privileges have corresponding responsibilities, as we never cease to remind our children; and it seems to me that the responsibility which comes with the privilege of being part of the catholic church is that our worship reflects the liturgical structure of the worship of the world-wide church. The basic structure and shape of the Sunday service has its roots, as David Stancliffe reminds us, in the earliest days of the church: a fourfold structure comprising the Gathering of the People, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Sacrament and the Blessing and Dismissal. That is the shape, the skeletal structure as he describes it, of Order One in *Common Worship* and 'is almost identical' he says, 'to that in the Roman Sacramentary and to the orders for the Eucharist in the Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian churches worldwide.' At the very least that shape should be reflected in the Sunday worship of churches up and down our land with the elements of offering and thanksgiving present in the third section even where there is no sacramental celebration. Our liturgy may have, it could be argued should have, a Scottish flavour;

but it should not seek to be different, or to depart from the historical and universal practice of the church, just for the sake of being different.

The third tendency to which I wish to draw attention is the increasing use of lay people to lead worship and of presbyteries running courses to authorise such lay service leaders. I have not undertaken any form of survey into such courses so what I am saying may be totally misguided but I sense that these courses run to equip people to conduct worship are usually led by elder trainers in the presbytery; and my question would be, what liturgical training and understanding do these elder trainers have? Of course, the question can be widened: what liturgical training do ministers receive? A lot of it is done through placement, but how much formal liturgical study is done – looking at the historical development of the liturgy, looking at how the communion service evolved in different ways at different times in different places, its relation to the daily office and then how the reformers developed the traditions they inherited? This is surely another of our privilege/responsibility partnerships. We have the privilege in the Church of Scotland of a great deal of latitude in worship but with that privilege there surely comes the responsibility of understanding both what liturgy is in a doctrinal sense and also how liturgy has been expressed by the church down through the centuries. It is one thing to decide not to do something for a reason, another not to do it because you didn't know its importance or relevance. If I were to decide to drop the epiclesis in a service of holy communion (perhaps in this case an unlikely scenario) it would be one thing to do so for a particular reason but quite another if it were because I did not know what an epiclesis was or was unaware of its historical place in the worship of the Scottish church.

I have pondered the state of worship, albeit not on the Eaglesham road but in Greyfriars Kirkhouse and I have thought about what is written in a book about contemporary worship – so what will be the practical outcome? I would like to think that both individually and as a society we could work with renewed and inspired enthusiasm towards the realisation of the long-held desire of so many in the Church Service Society, and in our sister society, the Scottish Church Society, to see the Holy Communion established as the normal Sunday service in the parish churches of Scotland. I would like to think that the Society will seek to promote not only seemliness in worship but also structure and shape which reflect both what we believe worship is about and the historical practice of the church down through the Christian

centuries. The Council is actively pursuing the idea of creating a presence for the Society on the World Wide Web – what a marvellous opportunity that could afford us to influence not only the content of prayers but also the structure and shape of services. In the Centenary edition of the Church Service Society Annual, Stuart Loudon identified unfinished tasks of the Society at that time, one of which related to the place of liturgical studies in the Scottish Divinity Halls. He quoted John MacLeod of Govan who spoke at the 1890 annual meeting of ‘the need in our Theological Colleges of greater attention being paid to the matter of worship... A very great result in the movement which has led to the formation of this Society would be accomplished by the institution of a lectureship on the subject of worship.’ With the recent developments in the broadening of the range of people who can lead services in the church, it is surely even more important in our day that the place of liturgical study in the training of those who will lead worship is recognised and emphasised. If you are given one of these Lego sets which make up a particular model, but are not given the instructions or even a picture of the intended end product, then you may or may not connect some of the pieces in the correct order – but you’ll never know, and sadly may not even care; such is the liturgical anarchy which can result from a lack of liturgical instruction.

This society is so important and the issues around the worship of the church are so important because, as Van Allmen and James Torrance and others have expressed it, worship is the epiphany of the Church. Worship is not an optional extra but is of the very life and essence of the church. The Church is the Church in her worship and as I draw these reflections to a close I want to quote two verses from a great Ascensiontide hymn by John MacLeod, which for me sum up why the worship we offer must always be the finest we can:

‘Lift up your hearts’: I hear the summons calling
Forth from the heavenly altar where he stands –
Our great High Priest, the Father’s love revealing,
In priestly act, with pleading outstretched hands.

‘Lift up your hearts’: with hearts to heaven soaring
The Church exulting makes her glad reply –
‘We lift them up unto the Lord,’ adoring;
Our God and thine, through thee, we glorify.

Alan Birss