CALVIN AND THE CAFÉ CHURCH
Reflections at the Interface between Reformed Theology and Current Trends in Worship

This paper was originally the Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa New Zealand School of Ministry Inaugural Lecture for 2005

Imagine for a moment dropping in on four different worship services in the Presbyterian Church on any given Sunday.

The first worship service is what some might call traditional Presbyterian: 4-hymn sandwich led by organ and choir, written order of worship, minister in vestments, strong focus on the sermon. Starts and finishes on the hour.

The second has a more informal and contemporary feel to it: brackets of songs led by a band and an energetic and personable worship leader, extempore prayer, testimonies, a message instead of a sermon, PowerPoint.

The third is in a church hall converted into a café for the occasion: cappuccinos and homemade baking, jazz background music, sitting around tables, theme introduced by a kind of master of ceremonies through poetry and DVD clip and opened up for discussion, interactive.

The fourth is contemplative: candles, lots of silence, guided meditation.

If this is a sample of the variety of styles of corporate worship that exist today, a number of questions begin to present themselves. Amidst the variety is there a common thread to these acts of worship that we can identify as being distinctively Presbyterian or Reformed? And if not, does the absence of a common thread matter, or is it simply a reflection of the post-denominational age in which we live? Similarly, are there any criteria that we can use to help us discern what are valid developments in corporate worship, or are we compelled to adopt a relativistic and pragmatic attitude – anything is valid provided it's done with integrity and succeeds in meeting a perceived need?

Leonard Sweet, American author of the widely acclaimed book *Aquachurch*,[1] would likely see contemporary developments and experiments in worship as a valid part of the Church's process of making new maps to guide itself in

a fluid, postmodern world. They would be expressions of what he calls the AncientFuture Church, telling the old story in new ways, taking the content of the Gospel (which, he says, is timeless and unchanging) and putting it in new containers.[2]

Writing in a slightly more radical vein from within our own New Zealand context, Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson and Cathy Kirkpatrick, who five years ago published a book called *The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church*, say that the content of worship will inevitably change as it is repackaged, but that's okay. They compare the task of preparing worship today to that of a curator of an art gallery.[3] A curator, they say, serves art by providing the context for others to engage and participate, giving attention to such things as juxtaposition, style, distance, light and shade. In worship, a curator is a maker of context rather than a presenter of content, a provider of a frame inside which the elements are arranged and rearranged to convey a message.

For these Baptist authors, AncientFuture worship is a way of describing the task of re-appropriating the traditional into the contemporary, and providing new contexts and new content for some of the old rituals, patterns and words. It's all about contextualisation, and giving people an opportunity to experience God, not just to hear about someone else's experience of God.

If there is something our four expressions of worship have in common, then, it does not appear to be a common liturgical tradition, but rather a shared reference point, Jesus Christ, whom Leonard Sweet refers to as the North Star, a navigational point transcending our personal and cultural coordinates, yet relating to us all through the particularities of our cultures and personal experiences.[4]

According to this logic, there is nothing intrinsic to Presbyterian or Reformed worship that might distinguish it from, say, worship in Baptist, Roman Catholic or for that matter Greek Orthodox churches. Moreover, one assumes, provided Jesus is the reference point, there is nothing that invalidates an act of worship from a Christian perspective.

In a follow-up CD to *The Prodigal Project* (called *Fractals*), Mark Pierson identifies six qualities of worship in a postmodern culture: authenticity, community, abandonment of dogma, focus on the arts, diversity, and

participation. Authenticity, he says, is the most important and the most difficult to achieve. It's about honesty and integrity, and not being driven by the worship leader to express beliefs we don't believe. Presumably, worship loses its authenticity when form is followed for the sake of form and fails to express or connect with people's personal experience. Inauthentic worship, says Pierson, becomes whoreship, a form of prostitution.

At this point, though, my question would be, authentic to whom? Authentic to the people that gather for worship (in which case, who decides if the bar of authenticity has been reached?), or authentic to the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ?

When, in his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul describes the institution of the Lord's Supper, he says that he passed on to them the tradition that he had received.[5] Any notion of authenticity at work here has nothing to do with Paul's personal intentions, or with the intentions of the Corinthian congregation. It's about faithful transmission.

This notion of faithfulness to what has been given in and through Christ is inherent in the Presbyterian understanding of ordained ministry, which itself is an expression of the ancient notion of apostolic tradition. As the Westminster documents teach, and our own General Assembly statement (1966) reaffirms, ministry is a gift of Christ to the Church and is signified through the laying on of hands by those already ordained to the ministry. Similarly, the tradition of ministers robing for ordination and/or induction arose from the recognition of the corporate nature of the ministry rather than an opportunity for an earnest individual to do his or her own thing for God.

Of course, that's often not how it's perceived. What was intended as a symbol of the corporate nature of ministry is often interpreted as a symbol of hierarchy. But the main point here is that the minister of word and sacraments, according to Presbyterian tradition, is not so much a curator of worship, or the facilitator of a God-experience, as an *ambassador for Christ*, appointed to make the mystery of Christ known.[6]

Accordingly, for all the diversity of worship styles that exist, we are bound to ask if there are constant norms for Christian worship that transcend cultures and keep us faithful to the gospel of Christ. Without such norms there is a danger that, as we focus on contextualisation and the individual experience

of the worshipper, and become ever more pluralistic, we will lose sight of the fact that Christian worship is ultimately bound up with honouring who God is and how God acts, as we understand these things to have been disclosed in the person of Christ.

Clearly there is something of a tension here between the theology of worship and the reality of religious pluralism. The tension is more acute than it was forty or so years ago, when Presbyterian worship pretty well had a standard template.

So what's changed? I'd include in my list the following 6 things:

1. The changing nature of church membership. Forty years ago, denominational boundaries were more distinct and denominational loyalties more pronounced than they are today. Baby boomer and subsequent generations do not place a great weight on denominational allegiance. Younger people tend to worship where they feel most comfortable, and don't care whether that's in a Presbyterian church, an Anglican church, a Baptist church, or an Assembly of God. Choices are often made on very practical grounds, such as the strength or otherwise of the children and youth programmes, the warmth of fellowship, as well as the style of worship and music. The denominational brand is less important than whether personal needs are being met and preferences catered for. An increasing proportion of our church membership base has neither an exclusively Presbyterian background nor an accompanying knowledge of and commitment to a Reformed approach to worship.
2. A spirit of experimentation. It has almost become something of a cliché to say that people today are into spirituality more than organised religion. A *NZ Herald* poll in January indicated that more than two-thirds of New Zealanders say they believe in God but less than half of them attend a religious worship service.[7] Spirituality is deemed to be less institutional and more personal, less prescribed and more experimental. Recent developments in contemporary and alternative styles of worship, including such innovations as café church, are mindful of such perceptions and the need to make the Church more accessible, relevant and relational. As a consequence, there is an increasing leaning towards the experimental and the edgy, a working out of an ecclesiology from the margins of the Church rather than traditionally defined centres.

I would further suggest that this spirit of experimentation in worship is a product not just of recently articulated notions of spirituality but also of the charismatic movement in the 1970s, which placed a high value on the freedom of the Spirit, and which in many ways was a kind of renewal movement even if, at times, it had the effect of dividing many 'traditional' congregations.

3. The impact of technology. In the 1970s it was the overhead projector. Today it's PowerPoint - from new songs projected on to a screen to video clips, DVD and CD tracks and visual images downloaded from the net and scanned into the laptop. It's about visual effect and multi-sensory engagement.
4. The availability of resources. Gone are the days when a single hymn book like the *Church Hymnary* provided the basis for congregational singing. Copyright licenses enable congregations to access a huge range of musical material. It's an eclectic mix, in which no value judgement is made between material from, say, Hillsong and material from the Royal School of Church Music. And what is so in relation to music is also the case in relation to other liturgical resources. Lacking a *Book of Common Order* of our own or the equivalent of the *Anglican Prayer Book*, people use a wide variety of resources, including a plethora of lectionary-based material on the web, much of which offers sermon outlines, prayers, music selections, and entire orders of worship. They opt for what works, not for what their tradition prescribes or recommends. As thorough a document as the Presbyterian Church's *Directory for Worship* (1995) is in terms of providing a rationale for the Presbyterian way of doing things, it does not feature prominently in the minds of ministers as they set about their task of preparing weekly worship services.
5. Multiculturalism. Corresponding to patterns of immigration in recent decades has been the growth of ethnic congregations and the provision of worship that caters for those who wish to worship in their native tongue. The growth of Pacific Island and Asian congregations has added considerably to the pluralism of the Presbyterian Church in this country, and is recognised in the development of the Pacific Island Synod and Council of Asian Congregations. We are increasingly a multicultural church.
6. From ordained ministry to worship leader. There has been a determined attempt in recent years to make worship more participatory, and to share the task of conducting worship. The modern worship leader may or may

not be ordained, may or may not have any formal training in the theology and conduct of worship, and is not infrequently the leader of the music group.

Of course, there is nothing new or radical about pluralism. As Emily Brink and John Witvliet point out in *The Worship Sourcebook*, 'each week throughout the world Christians gather for worship in mud huts and Gothic cathedrals, in prisons and nursing homes, in storefront buildings and village squares, in megachurches and old country chapels. In these diverse contexts the style of worship varies greatly.'[8]

But the point I'm developing in this address is that when we fail to give adequate attention to the importance of a unifying tradition and enduring liturgical principles that flow from a Trinitarian doctrine of worship, the flip side to pluralism and contextualisation is confusion. So, when *The Prodigal Project* offers a definition of worship as 'a person or persons responding to God',[9] it seems to me that worship has been reduced to an act of individual and collective self-expression, and the door is opened for everyone to do what is right in their own eyes.

This is where, I think, we have much to gain from revisiting the liturgical theology of John Calvin and John Knox and allowing it to inform our understanding of worship as new styles of worship continue to evolve.

For Calvin and Knox, worship was a Trinitarian event. It has a Trinitarian structure. We worship the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. Worship is not something that *we* do in the first instance. It involves us, and is intensely dialogical, but it does not originate with us. Nor does it depend on our creativity and strength. Through the activity of the Spirit we are brought to share in the Son's worship of the Father, which is rendered through the Spirit in our place and on our behalf.

According to this understanding, Christ is not merely the *reference point* of Christian worship as Leonard Sweet would have us believe. He is the *leader and mediator* of worship. As Calvin himself declared, it is *Christ* who leads our songs, and it is Christ who is the chief composer of our hymns.[10] Christ is our great High Priest, the One True *Leitourgos* of the heavenly sanctuary (cf. Hebrews 8:2). As such the *leitourgia* of Jesus is contrasted with the *leitourgia* of humankind. This is the worship which God has provided for humanity,

and which alone is acceptable to God. The worship that Jesus offers gathers up the worship of ancient Israel and completes it, and becomes the substance of all Christian worship.[11]

In emphasising the mediatorial role of Christ in worship Calvin was being consistent with the understanding of the early Church, at least until the fourth century or so. From that time onward, however, as the Church countered the threat posed by the Arian denial of the deity of Christ, liturgical prayers and doxologies were increasingly directed to the Son as well as to the Father (to eliminate any possible doubt about the Son's divine status). While a Trinitarian formula was thus retained in public prayer it had in fact undergone a subtle yet profound change. For as the Son was worshipped and adored along with the Father, his mediatorial role in relation to prayer and worship was obscured, and substitute figures were found, including the medieval priesthood, the communion of saints and the Virgin Mary. Calvin was fiercely critical of these substitute figures, who, he felt, had displaced Christ from his mediatorial role, with catastrophic effects on the Church's worship. Hence his strong emphasis on the priesthood of Christ.

An important consequence of Christ's priesthood, as Calvin put it, is that 'we who are defiled in ourselves, *yet are priests in him*', and on these grounds alone are we able to 'offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifices of prayer and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God.'[12]

In other words, the concept of the *priesthood of all believers*, so often appealed to today in promoting a participatory approach to the preparation and conduct of worship, only has meaning, as far as Calvin is concerned, when it flows from a prior recognition of the *sole priesthood of Christ*. When the priesthood of all believers is cut adrift from its Christological mooring the entire focus of worship begins to shift from what is happening in and through Christ to what we do: *we* connect with God, *we* sing our songs and offer our prayers, *we* express ourselves. Worship becomes human-centred rather than God-centred.

I would further suggest that as this shift in focus occurs there is an attendant pressure on us to get it right, to come up with ever new creative and innovative ways of generating God-experiences for the punters, and the more

we come to rely on the personality, charisma and creativity of the minister or worship leader to deliver the goods. Forty years ago T.F. Torrance coined the phrase 'protestant sacerdotalism' to describe the displacement of the humanity of Christ by the personality of the minister. 'How frequently,' he says, 'the minister's prayers are so crammed with his own personality (with all its boring idiosyncrasies!) that the worshipper cannot get past him in order to worship God in the name of Christ – but is forced to worship God in the name of the minister! ... And how frequently the whole life of the congregation is so built up on the personality of the minister that when he goes the congregation all but collapses or dwindles away.'[13]

Might I suggest the following exercise? The next time you attend a worship service take note of those aspects of the service that give expression to the mediatorial role of Christ and those aspects that obscure it. You might notice, for example, that prayers are concluded with, '...through Christ our Lord,' or '...in Jesus' name' – a sure sign that the mediatorial role of Christ is being recognised. Conversely, you might notice that the worship seems largely directed to Jesus, especially in the music, and that as he is made the object of the church's worship so other mediatorial figures assert themselves, such as the music group or the worship leader.

For Calvin, one of the consequences of a commitment to the priestly and mediatorial role of Christ in worship is a strongly Eucharistic theology. This is often overlooked when we talk about the Reformed emphasis upon the Word, but for Calvin (and for Knox) the preaching of the Word should always be accompanied by the administration of the Lord's Supper. Christian worship is both kerygmatic and sacramental. The Word should lead us to the Table.

The fact that Calvin was unable to practise what he preached in terms of weekly communion did not alter the strength of his conviction. It is at the Table that the priesthood of Christ comes into sharpest focus. Again taking his lead from the book of Hebrews, Calvin argued that the priestly work of Christ refers not only to what he *accomplished* once and for all at Calvary, but also to what he *continues to do* as the One in whom our sanctified humanity has been lifted into the presence of the Father, and who intercedes for all humankind, including those for whom no one else intercedes.[14] The One in whom all humanity is represented in his incarnation, death and resurrection, continues to represent all humanity in his ascension. The vicarious (or

representative) humanity of Jesus the High Priest is just as important to his intercessory role (in the heavenly sanctuary) as it was to his sacrificial role (on the Cross).

John Knox, who was deeply influenced by Calvin's liturgical theology, saw more clearly than any other Reformer what this meant in relation to worship in general and the Eucharist in particular. He believed that the Eucharist should be regarded not merely as the event through which one receives Christ and his benefits, but also as the event at which, in union with him who continues to intercede for sinners, one engages in prayer. The Eucharist, thus understood, is not only a meal of thanksgiving; through the act of intercession it becomes a means of sharing in the saving ministry of Christ in the world. It has a missiological dimension.

Moreover, in the Eucharist Christ, through the Spirit, not only brings his once and for all earthly ministry to our remembrance. He also lifts up our hearts and minds in the *Sursum Corda* into his communion with the Father, to make us participants of the new humanity in him. This was why Calvin took issue with Zwingli who, by reducing the sacrament to a meal of remembrance and the elements of bread and wine to mere symbols, failed to acknowledge the real presence of Christ in the sacrament.

Even though the Presbyterian tradition has been no more successful than Calvin in celebrating weekly the Lord's Supper, it has endeavoured at various times to establish a Eucharistic pattern to its worship. As the introduction to the 3rd edition of *The Church Hymnary* (1973) stated: 'The Committee in determining the order in which the hymns are arranged has borne in mind that the Order of Holy Communion is normative for worship in the Reformed Church and that, where there is no regular weekly celebration of Holy Communion, the service should still follow the Eucharistic pattern.'[15]

Comparing Calvin and Knox's theology of worship with the reality of worship in our time, James Torrance has observed that most worship today 'is in practice Unitarian, has no doctrine of the mediator or the sole priesthood of Christ, is human-centred, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness.'[16]

If this is indeed so, the question is, does it matter? Should we be concerned?

Yes. It seems to me that many developments and experiments in worship that accompany talk about the emerging church are taking place in a theological vacuum. Ignorance of the classic liturgies and what they have meant to the Church down the centuries, ignorance of the liturgical theology of Calvin and Knox, ignorance of the role of ordained ministry, will lead ultimately to an impoverishment of Presbyterian worship and a detachment of Presbyterian worship from its Reformed, early Church and indeed Jewish roots. Some would argue that that is happening already. Marva Dawn, for example, talks about the dumbing down of worship right across the Church.[17] That which we regard at one time as bravely navigating uncharted waters could with the benefit of hindsight turn out to be symptomatic of us having lost our way.

The gap between those who favour traditional or liturgical approaches to worship and those who favour non-liturgical approaches appears to be widening in the Presbyterian Church. There is a need to engage constructively with both ends of the liturgical and theological spectrum. In this regard, I would recommend *The Worship Sourcebook*, edited by Emily Brink and John Witvliet and published in 2004. Brink and Witvliet refer to their book as something of a unique experiment: 'It is designed to be used by Christians who value free-church, low-church, nonliturgical, evangelical approaches to worship but who also want to learn from and draw on historic patterns of worship. At the same time, the book aims to be useful and instructive to congregations who practise traditional or liturgical worship and who may be looking for ways to adapt it or to rethink its meaning.'

I am not advocating here a slavish use of set liturgies, or suggesting that worship should be locked in a time warp, although I agree with Brink and Witvliet that a well-conceived order of worship is one of the most important things a congregation can have to ensure that the norms of Christian worship are faithfully practised.

Calvin's views on this matter were emphatic: 'Concerning a form of prayer and ecclesiastical rites, I highly approve of it that there should be a certain form from which ministers be not allowed to vary. That first, some provision be made to help the unskilfulness and simplicity of some; secondly, that the consent and harmony of the Churches one with another may appear; and lastly, that the capricious giddiness and levity of such as effect innovations may be prevented. ... Therefore, there ought to be a stated form of prayer and administration of the sacraments.'[18]

Brink and Witvliet acknowledge that 'for some, an order of worship might feel like a straitjacket, limiting creativity. But', they suggest, 'consider jazz music. Jazz features spontaneous improvisation. But it works only because the musicians are following a regular, predictable, repeated chord structure. Without this structure, the music would be chaos. Meaningful spontaneity and creativity happen within structure'.[19]

Of course, in the missional context in which the post-Christendom Church finds itself, some people will inevitably ask whether spontaneity and creativity within a given structure goes far enough. How much latitude do we have to change the structure itself for the sake of engaging with an unchurched generation?

I'm not sure there is a clear-cut answer to this question, but I would argue that perceived missional needs to do not absolve us from testing the theo-logic of our worship. In practical terms, I would want to ask of any proposed development in worship whether, in addition to connecting with people in ways to which they can relate, this will help in forming them for a deeper experience of the triune God. I would further ask the extent to which the marks of Christian worship, as are found in Scripture, observed in the earliest forms of Christian worship and given such clear expression by Calvin and Knox, are present.

I think the practice of corporate worship in the Presbyterian Church is at a critical juncture. The diversity we may think worthy of celebration could equally overwhelm us. There is a pressing need for some theological reflection in relation to worship. In the nineteenth century the formation of the Church Service Society and Scottish Church Society responded to a similarly pressing need in Scotland. The question is, what comparable forums and opportunities might we create for our day in Aotearoa New Zealand?

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1 Leonard Sweet, *Aquachurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Loveland, Colorado: Group Publishing, 1999)

2 *Ibid.*, p.30

3 *The Prodigal Project: Journey into the Emerging Church* (London: SPCK, 2000), p.63

4 *Aquachurch*, p.40
5 1 Corinthians 11:23. Earlier in that chapter Paul commends the Corinthians for maintaining the traditions just as he handed them on to them (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:2).
6 Cf. Ephesians 3:1-13
7 *NZ Herald*, Friday January 7 2005, A4
8 *The Worship Source Book* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship & Baker Books, 2004), p.15
9 *Prodigal Project*, p.64
10 Calvin, J., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Geneva, 1559, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.15.6
11 Cf. James Torrance, "The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship", *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson (Ed.), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p.350
12 *In*. II.15.6 (italics mine)
13 T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), pp.167-8
14 *In*. III.20.20
15 *The Church Hymnary, Third Edition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.viii
16 J.B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p.20
17 Cf. Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)
18 *Op*. XIII ,70, cited by William D. Maxwell, "Reformed", *Ways of Worship: The Report of a Theological Commission of Faith and Order*, ed. P. Edwall, E. Hayman, W.D. Maxwell (London: SCM, 1951), p.121
19 *Worship Source Book*, p.24