

**COMMON WORSHIP IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**  
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To have a god is to possess a self-understanding, and to be a self is to have a god. Worship, then, is both, and at the same time an honoring of our god and an enactment of our self-understanding.

Christian worship is the portrayal of those gathered as the forgiven ones, the thankful ones, the dedicated ones. This is just who they must grasp themselves to be when God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes their God.

### Selfhood and Symbol

Modern men are becoming newly aware that selfhood inescapably involves some kind of self-conscious participation in communal symbols through which one is enabled to grasp or become who he understands himself to be. The questions of *who I am* or of *how I can find meaningful symbols* are being grasped as the questions which are prior to all of our queries about life. These issues are indications that the twentieth century is urgently involved in the problem of worship.

A primary emphasis of the church is therefore upon understanding selfhood and worship, and these are but two sides of the same coin. This concern informs and illuminates all other aspects of the program. The members both worship together and study about worship. In order to grasp the inner meaning of worship, one must participate in the activity of worship itself, at least as an empathetic spectator.

In this activity, we rehearse our consciousness of the event that discloses the meaning of our selfhood in our finite situation: that meaning without which men who have seen too deeply and too much cannot live. Here, self-understanding and the symbolic dimension of life converge as our common worship.

Whatever else the Body of Christ is, and whatever else its task may be, it is first of all a body that gathers together to worship God in Christ. Worship is her focal activity without which all other endeavors lose their meaning and all other missions become perverted. Any work which the Church performs in her varied ministries to the world, which does not flow out of the experience of common worship, may be good from one or another perspective, but it is not Christian.

Reflection in this area necessarily makes us the more keenly aware that the worshiping community is a part of the total Church, if for no other reason than as a member of the Common Body of Christ we are participating in the judgment and renewal which God is working among all his people in our time at the point of the meaning and nature of Christian worship. The worship of the Church is only one of the areas of her life which is under divine assault, but it is a major one and, it might be said, a particularly painful one. Man seems to be more easily driven to re-examine his intellectual life than to question the substance of his worship. Nonetheless, the Church today is questioning and this is the beginning of renewal.

The common worship of the local congregation informs and nourishes the total program: its common study, its life together, and concern for service in the world. Outside of common worship, study together becomes a matter of mental exercises or barren intellectualism rather than a vital effort

question put to the worshiper is not how do you feel or what do you know, but who do you choose to be in the light of God's activity in Christ?

A third implication which has particular significance for the comprehension of the inner meaning of Christian worship is that the God that is worshiped and the self-understanding given in worship determine the basic structure or form of worship. If, for instance, the great god nation is worshiped and the worshipers understand themselves essentially as children of the nation, the forms of worship will have a certain pattern. In Christian worship the God in Christ determines the inner structure or the dramatic movement of the service. Regardless of how radically different Christian liturgies may be on the periphery, at the core they have a common denominator. In the area of thought, though the Church has many theologies, there is one common witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So behind the great variations in worship, be they Methodist, Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Roman or Baptist there is a common structure. This means that whenever and wherever the Church gathers to worship, in the east or in the west, in the first century or in the twentieth, in Romanism or in Protestantism, the dramatic act is at the heart one and the same. As God is enabling our age to be more concerned with what historic Christianity affirms than with what any particular denomination believes, so He is opening our eyes to the unity of our worship. In this area as well as in others we are by God's grace recovering our oneness in Christ and beholding anew that we are all a part of a "great cloud of witnesses."

### The Threefold Structure of Christian Worship

How then are we to talk of the common structure behind the varied structures of Christian worship: first to all, the order of service of the Body has within it a threefold division. One part has to do with confession and pardon; a second with praise and witness; the third part, with offering and dedication. Neither in their nature nor order are these three parts arbitrary, and whenever one looks amid the endless variety of forms, these appear in one shape or another and will continue to do so as long as men congregate in the name of Christ. This is true because these three divisions, like three acts in a great drama, tell the story of the life of the man who stands before the God in Christ. They present the self-understanding of the people who are encountered by the Word of God. In the words of one interpreter, here is the story of our life embodied in the Christian drama of worship.

"In the midst of my sinful attempts either to go on about my own affairs apart from God or to 'worship' God in my own way, God suddenly confronts me with his Word (which, when written down, we call the Bible—when concrete in events, we call Christ), which is the terrifying announcement that I am a sinner and that I cannot worship God in this condition. In the face of such a revelation, I can do no other (if I am to respond Christianly) than fall on my knees and confess myself to be indeed that which I have been shown to be—a sinner before God and man. Without this acknowledgment, I am only an imposter when I try to stand before God and worship him. But for those who confess their sin, he is faithful to forgive. Such forgiveness enables me—nay, commands me—to rise and praise God, to thank him for his innumerable benefits, and to hear with understanding his demands upon me in his Word. But if I confess such faith in such a God, it behooves me to cease my anxious care about my future, about the dangers which I fear might overwhelm me—and to offer all such concerns to him who cares for us, and who has assured us today of his care in all the Scripture we have heard.

"Tomorrow, of course, I have forgotten that I can trust him, and that he cares for me; I am again attempting to live life on my own terms, attempting to find security in the passingness of life, attempting to avoid the hands of the One who gives both life and death, both Yes and No, both Cross and Resurrection. And as one who has forgotten, I am suddenly confronted by a Word which declares me to be a sinner, and calls me to repentance and once more I am given his grace to enter another day—and so on, day after day. This is the story of my life."

Just what is this structure behind the structures in Christian services, this common core beyond the differences? In brief, it is the portrayal of life as it is known and lived before the God in Christ. It is a story with quite distinguishable movements or themes: guilt, redemption and new life in the community of Christ.

Actually the Christian service of worship is three services in one. It is a service of (1) confession and pardon, (2) praise and dependence and (3) dedication and offering. One may conceive of it as the great drama of our salvation in three acts with a prologue and epilogue.

Christian worship begins with an ascription to God. This is calling to mind which God this drama is enacted before. This activity is the prologue.

### Act I: Service of Confession

When we stand before that God who loves us in Christ, we know ourselves to be sinful people, and this is where the Church begins. Act One has two scenes. In the first the community is engaged in repentance.

In some services an appointed member rises on behalf of all to call the gathered ones to be who they are before this God. This is a summons to leave the world of false worship, pretension and self-sufficiency and to assume responsibility for their sins against God, themselves and their fellow men.

In response to this call, the congregation bows or kneels in general confession. Here the community is discovered unto itself—faithlessly afraid of life, filled with guilt and anxiety, closed toward the future and cut off from fellow beings. In this knowledge they humbly acknowledge their common sin before Almighty God.

The dramatic element in this episode is intense and sweeping. Dead men who pretend to be alive here die together. Faithless men who boast to God of their righteousness together face their lives. Blind men who imagine they can see, together become blind.

The second scene—reconciliation—is an answer to the first. The penitents crying out of the depths are now confronted in one form or another with the Word in Jesus Christ. . .that God receives men just as they are, forgives them of their sins and raises them from bondage to the past to a new future. Such a word is news to men who know they are dying. It is *good news*, as the congregation together appropriates anew the love and forgiveness of God.

In some services this declaration or pronouncement is called absolution. In others, comforting words or words of assurance. By whatever name, it is the remembering together God's eternal forgiveness in Christ.

This light of divine forgiveness penetrating the darkness of man's sin completes the movement in Act One. A people dead and buried is now raised from the grave. The blind see, the deaf hear, prisoners are released, sick men made whole and the sting of death removed.

Some readers may observe here that they have attended Christian services where no Act One as described here appeared true. Some services do seem to begin with the second act of the drama of our salvation. Actually Act One is performed behind the scenes. In certain instances before the people gather, the priest or pastor rehearses this part of the drama by holding up before God the sins of the congregation and receiving on their behalf the divine mercy. In other cases, the people are supposed to prepare themselves in the quietness of their prayer closet for the service by searching their hearts, repenting their sins and appropriating God's grace.

The Office of Preparation is the necessary beginning of Christian worship. Where it is not present, worship may be going on, but it is not the Christian community which is worshipping.

Act One, then, is the rehearsal of crucifixion and resurrection. It moves from unacknowledged sin to confession and from confession to forgiveness. Godly sorrow is transformed to Easter joy. The congregation thus is prepared for the joyous mood of praise and thanksgiving which permeates the second act.

Immediately they break forth in songs as they behold once more that all things are made new. "Lift up your hearts," one may sing, while the rest respond, "We lift them up unto the Lord."

### **Act II: Service of the Word**

If the mood of Act One is basically godly sorrow, the mood of Act Two is joy in the Lord. The players here are those who in the first act were delivered from bondage. Now, like the ancient Israelites on the far shore of the Red Sea, they sing and dance before the Lord. They are the ones who have been crucified and raised again.

That Last Reality, which hitherto they feared as their enemy . . . that One who appeared as the destroyer of all their causes and meanings . . . that One who writes a great NO over all their life, they are now able to receive as their Father. Their hostility toward God, the Maker and Limiter of their life, has been overcome in their repentance and their receiving unto themselves God's forgiveness.

It must be emphasized that honor is not given here to some idea or feeling which may be called God. Nor is it offered to some super-human being which relieves them from the responsibility of historical existence. It is precisely from these false gods that they have been delivered.

The true God which they now worship is that which meets them in life as the one who brings all to be and all not to be . . . the One who is present in every life situation—of joy or sorrow, of success or failure, of birth or death.

At the edge of the desert of life, at the side of the grave of death these actors raise their hymns of grateful praise to the Lord of Life and Death, strange and glorious sight.

Act Two closes with a mighty affirmation of faith. Whether this be in the form of a proclamation by the whole cast or a word of witness by one member on behalf of the whole cast is not important, perhaps. The important matter is, be it creed or sermon, that it is not an expression of assent to intellectual concepts, but a poem through which the congregated declare that they are, by His grace, the sons of the triune God.

At this point in the service a voice cries out, "Let us pray."

The worshipers now turn to the future tasks of responsibility in and for the world.

### **Act III: Service of Dedication**

The concluding act in the Christian drama of salvation is a great pageant of offering.

There is a double action here which is nevertheless a single movement. The players are presenting themselves unto God—all they are, all they value, all they possess—yet marching into the life of the world for responsible involvement.

In the beginning of the drama these folk were called out from their idolatrous attachment to the world. Here at its close, they are returning again to the world in obedience to God. Having been

delivered from bondage to the world, they are now released for a free and open life in and for the world.

The first scene begins with acts of petition and supplication. The players are not engaged in magical manipulation of cosmic powers, but rather they are surrendering into God's hands their future and destiny. The worshippers have turned their daily cares over to the One whose forgiving presence is everywhere and precisely here in the darkness of the unknown tomorrow.

With their needs in God's hands, they are free to turn their concern outward toward their fellow creatures about them. In the prayers of intercession, whether these are in the form of collects said by all, or litanies read responsively, or pastoral prayers on behalf of the whole congregation, or silent supplications spontaneously interrupted by one or another of the members who lead the group in special intercessions—here as above the whole congregation is participating. Even when all do not utter the prayers, the "amen" said by all at the end of each is the sign of common appropriation.

The worshippers are here offering up themselves to God by placing in His hands the world which has now become their world and offering up themselves in presenting to God their responsibility in and for their world. In brief, the players, having received themselves and the world as gifts from God, are offering them back again.

Prayers are made for the Church and then for the home and the state, and the economic life, and the educational institutions, and the international structures. The worshippers then turn with particular concern for those living at the far edge or forced out of these natural orders. Intercessions are now offered for the poor and the hungry, the sick and those in prison, for the outcast and those who have lost the kindly light of reason and those who are on beds of death. In this action the community is boldly involving itself in life as it is and daringly entering into the existence of other creatures.

The second scene of this Act of Dedication is the presentation of the offering. Here these worshippers again offer up themselves in offering unto God their worldly possessions. It is an offering that is made, not a collection which is taken.

Whatever is given is but a token indicating that all of our goods are gifts to be used in responsible living in the world. At the close of the procession a prayer of dedication is made signifying that this action is intended for God's glory and the service of the neighbor. At this point the players break forth into a doxology or hymn of praise to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is a fitting finale to Act Three and the whole drama of salvation.

Act Three is a dramatic enactment of life in the Holy Spirit. It is a life of utter dependence upon God and utter responsibility for the world, a life which expects grace in every future. Such life in the Spirit is a gift to all who rejoice in the Lord through the forgiveness of their sins. After the epilogue, which may consist of a hymn which once again indicates and honors the God we stand before, plus a benediction, the actors leave the stage. They go out to live the lives they have dramatized of perpetual repentance, thankful praise and creative love.

One day—tomorrow perhaps—they will return to rehearse again the drama of their salvation that they may remember anew who and Whose they are.

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†From *Wesley Orders of Common Prayer*, John Wesley (edited by Edward C. Hobbs), Nashville, Tennessee: National Methodist Student Movement, 1957.