

Session 6

The Re-formation of Worship for a Christian Resurgence Circle

The word “worship” can refer to both a primal attitude within a human being and a cultic practice of a particular group. Cultic practices may also be done in solitary as well as in groups. This paper will focus on worship as group practices.

Worship as a Primal Attitude

If what we mean by “worship” is an attitude or a devotion that fundamentally characterizes a human being’s living, then everyone can be said to worship something. A person can worship family or work or sex or nation or communism or capitalism or success or money or some unique combination of these and other givers of life-meaning. The worship of God in the biblical heritage is variously interpreted by centuries of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worshippers. But the deep core of these complex heritages appears when we attach the devotional word “God” or “my God” to the Final Mysterious Reality present in all coming and going, all birthing and dying, all forming and disintegrating. Such radical monotheism is the primal attitude that underlies the re-formation of worship for a Christian Resurgence Circle.

Worship as a Cultic Practice

This primal monotheistic attitude or devotion can become a cultic practice – a group action done to express, embody, and enhance the living of this radical devotion. Worship is not something we think; it is something we do. Worship is action, not thinking about action. Thinking and thinking about action may be a part of the action of worship, but the act of worship itself is action. It is participation in a drama. It is putting on a play. It is joining a dance. It is a group session with specific group activities. This might mean sitting in absolute silence with other meditators. Most often what Christians mean by worship involves singing, praying, speaking, hearing, and perhaps body postures or movements, perhaps eating bread and wine. Whatever cultic practices we do become worship to the extent that these practices reach beyond themselves to the Ground of our Being, to the essence of being human.

For our worship to remain alive, we must remain attentive to the fact that Christianity is undergoing a major language and metaphor transition. No word can be assumed to be meaningful without life grounding. God, Christ, Holy Spirit, sin, faith, justification, sanctification, prayer – neither these, nor hundreds of other words can be assumed to have obvious meaning. The two-story world picture with “Sacred” above and the “profane” or “ordinary” below is a symbology that we must reinterpret so that the Sacred is viewed as shining through each and every ordinary experience. We understand the Sacred not as other beings in some adjacent realm but as the fullness of Reality moving toward through the familiar, ordinary, pedestrian, everyday happenings of our actual living. This is a major revolution in religious sensibilities, not to be underestimated. This huge transition makes a constant demand on everything we do in religious practice.

Nevertheless, let us dare to be creative with our worship practices. Let us be bold to experiment, understanding that an action of worship includes symbolic forms. The most general categories of religious symbolic forms are: (1) icon, (2) myth, and (3) ritual.

Icons are art objects that relate to the primal devotion. They can be three candles, bread, wine, colored fabrics, or more complex things. The cross or crucifix has been important in Christian worship history. In our CRC group life, we have kept our iconic

practice simple. We want to avoid superstition or idol worship of specific iconic objects. We also want to avoid sentimentality – that is, objects that tend to elicit superficial feelings or attachments.

Myths are stories that tend to weave in and out of any action of worship. Myths are the linguistic art forms that shape the mind with regard to the heritage that is involved. Many traditional myths -- stories that include God, gods, goddesses, devils, angels, and such -- function as worship only if they symbolize our actual experience. Some stories represent how we think life “should be” or “hope it will be.” Mythic materials are useful for Christian worship only when they tell the story of our experience – of our actual existence.

Ritual is the overall pattern of dramatic actions that structures the time of worship. Ritual is a sort of play or dance that has primal meanings. Like icon and myth, ritual is designed to awaken the primal attitude or devotion that constitutes the group’s worship.

In the Middle Ages, the basic dramas of Christian worship (confession, celebration, and dedication) were traditionally separated into the confession booth, the celebration of mass, and various rituals of dedication to birth, confirmation, vocation, marriage, death, and more. The Protestant Reformation tended to bring the three basic dynamics of confession, celebration, and dedication together into one “service of worship.” In many Protestant traditions, confession became a prayer by the preacher or read by everyone near the beginning of the service. Dedication became a sort of closing to the service that indicated return to ordinary life with the worship’s context in play. Sometimes dedication was an altar call involving personal dedication or rededication. In the celebration part of the worship drama, Protestants tended to place less emphasis upon the bread and wine and more emphasis on hearing and preaching the “Biblical Word.” This was commonly expanded beyond the worship service into classes for study of the Bible and study of the world in which the biblical message was to be lived and proclaimed.

Our CRC worship practice is heavily dependent on the creativity and personal relevance emphasized in the Protestant Reformation. We can also learn from the rich poetry and drama of Catholicism, but we must avoid the Medieval topdown shaping of a population with a Christian culture, the meaning of which is to be accessed personally when and if we can. We seek to relate worship to the present day and to present groups of people. Nevertheless, we remain open to an ongoing dialogue with the entire worship history of Christianity, accessing personally as much of the Christian symbolic heritage as we can.

A Three-act Drama of Worship

The ritual practices we are currently using in our CRCs are somewhat arbitrary, and we do not require sameness in all CRCs. We do recommend, however, noticing the value of the three-act ritual structure of confession, celebration, and dedication which corresponds to the three aspects of the grace happening that Paul Tillich so carefully pointed out in his classic sermon “You Are Accepted.” Confession is the initial awareness in which the healing called “grace” can happen. Celebration is the dawning of the basic message of our acceptance within the actual moments of our living. Dedication is accepting our acceptance and thereby restoring devotion to the realistic living of our entire lives. In our experiments over the last 25 years, we have found it beneficial for the drama of worship to be structured in accord with these three dynamics, played out in that 1, 2, 3 order.

The drama of **confession** as it is formulated in weekly CRC meetings makes every member the hearer of confession. Every member confesses a portion his or her life to every other member through a device we have called a “go-round.” This confessional

drama is ideal for small-group practice, for it clarifies that each person is both confessing to the others and playing pastor to the others. The guide of this process plays pastor, formulating the confession question and then announcing the word of absolution after the go-round of confessing. This drama, created on the spot, ritualizes the reality that we are always having to confess our failures in being devoted to the realistic living of our lives. Our ritual drama thus begins appropriately by ritualizing basic honesty about our current need for further healing of our lives.

The second act of worship (**celebration**) is rather elongated in the weekly ritual commonly practiced in our small-group experiments. We celebrate various events in the life of the members and of the culture. We celebrate through a dialogue with the Bible. We celebrate through a group study that grounds concepts in our life experience. We may celebrate by eating and drinking the iconic elements of bread and wine.

In the third act of worship (**dedication**) we articulate our concerns for self and others through prayers of petition and intercession. We call this “dedication” because we understand prayer as our intentions, our initiatives, our freely assumed responses to Reality.

This three-act drama has an opening and closing. As an opening some of us use a candle-lighting ritual with a trinitarian song, a few minutes of dance, a few minutes of meditation, and another song. This prepares us for the three-act ritual drama by calling Reality to be Present in all its various dimensions – voice, movement, and inner silence. Our closing is a benediction or a candle-extinguishing ritual repeating the trinitarian song. Other songs may be used as transitions between the basic acts of worship or enrichments of those acts.

Facing our Worship Future

Our Post-Christendom, Christian worship (in our CRCs and elsewhere) will remain an emerging creation for decades. It cannot be hurried. It won't be completed this year or the next. Furthermore, what we do in a weekly, small-group meeting is not the whole story of Christian symbolic life. In our long-range whole future, we may still have grand pageants with hundreds or thousands of people. We may still have marriages and funerals. We may still note ritually the births of children and the coming of age of adolescents. We may still ritually notice the importance of vocational commitments. We may still explore celebration of seasons of the year, landmarks in historical time, and more. We will also continue to probe into meal rituals and solitary exercises.

It may take decades, perhaps a century, to find the appropriate worship practices to occupy the vacuum left by the passing into obsolescence of the ritual past of Christendom. True and powerful symbols emerge slowly out of the actual living of a community of worshiping people. We recommend patience.