

The Travail of Worship in a Culture of Hype: “Where Has All the Glory Gone?”

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At the table of the Lord's Supper the ancient acclamation of the people rings out: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory..." This ascription of holiness to the Creator of all things sounds a theme John Calvin pondered well. The world, he claimed, is "the arena of God's glory." The chief end of humanity is infinitive: to glorify God and enjoy God forever." This is the astonishing biblical and theological claim at the heart of my concern in this essay: the intimate relationship between the *doxa* of God and human *doxology*. The problem to be addressed is our diminished and even lost sense of this relationship.

Discourse about holiness, much less about human sanctity, is grounded in the glory of the divine life poured out for the life of the world. Thus, God as the Holy three in One and the glory due that Name comprise a double helix: we begin with either reality and are compelled toward the other. This is a veritable tracing, one might say, of the DNA of heaven and earth. This is why the Eucharistic acclamation is itself a rehearsal of the very name and nature of the divine. This sounds at the center of authentically biblical worship. If this is true, then matters of holiness and glory also emerge at the heart of Christian life and theology. But in our contemporary North American context we are painfully aware that how we live seems so far away from how we worship.

During a recent congregational seminar on worship I was asked, "Now that we've had all this liturgical reform and renewal, what's next?" The person observed that we now know all about the classical Christian patterns. We know how the Lord's Day is best celebrated in Word and Sacrament, and the recovery of more adequate coverage of the Bible comes with the lectionary and the cycles of time in the calendar. But none of this seems very relevant to how we live and to the desires of today's churches. In fact, it seems increasingly irrelevant, if not dull, simply to be historically informed in our practices of worship. "What's really new and exciting?" "What will bring the younger people in?" This theological and biblical stuff you gave us just doesn't seem to work. Thus speaks much of the current American cultural sensibility.

This is not the first time pastors have heard these kinds of questions and comments. Increasing numbers of lay leaders, seminarians, and preachers speak this way, particularly when the first priority is taken to be outreach and increasing membership. The number of books and tapes advocating more relevant worship, and impatience with the larger Christian and biblical tradition (often collapsed into the term "traditional" versus "contemporary") is legion. The current travail of Christian worship is too easily summarized in these terms. But, as I hope to make clear, addressing the travail is not simply a matter of pragmatic cultural strategy. It is a matter of theological substance—a matter of glory and holiness.

I begin with four major theses. First, Christian public worship aims at the glorification of the God of all creation, and the sanctification of all that is human—even better, the sanctification of all that is creaturely. This means, as Marva Dawn,

Tom Troeger, Brian Wren, and others have reminded us, that Christian worship is not the same as entertainment, therapy, a political rally, a concert, or a gathering for moral exhortation. Rather, Christian worship is God-oriented, anamnestic, and doxological. This is to say that the Christian assembly gathers about the book, the font, and the table in the name of God to remember who God is, and what God has done, supremely recapitulated and offered in Christ. This meeting renders all human and creaturely life to God. In this sense the Lord's Day liturgy is best conceived as the ongoing prayerful dialogue between God and humanity. Yet this can be so easily obscured when it is regarded as a series of exciting outreach strategies.

Second, Christian worship is marked by its sourcing in Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and by its sense of solidarity with the redemptive narrative of Jesus Christ in the line of the prophets. For Christian faith, the glory of God is given a Christological focus: what Jesus *said and did* attested to in Scripture and living tradition, he in the midst of this particular assembly. Moreover, he *will say and do these things* until the Reign of God comes in fullness. By "these things" I mean proclaiming the in-breaking Kingdom, and offering healing, forgiveness, nourishment, freedom for mercy and justice, and a way of life with God and neighbor.

The third thesis: Christian worship is always culturally embodied and embedded. This carries with it the possibility of "cultural captivity." But it also carries with it "culture-transforming" power. In blessing the Name, in thanking, praising, lamenting, and interceding, we employ human symbolic means of communication. This worship involves particular languages, music, gesture, visual form, movement, ritual elements, and vesture. All of these are drawn from commonly shared forms of social life in order to participate in worship. That is, the doxology of worship risks the use of cultural means with which the act of worship itself stands in tension.

The fourth thesis: Christian worship invites and commands wholehearted participation of the gathering "in Spirit and in truth." This means that we are to bring our whole life to worship. The Shema still stands. We are to love the Lord our God with all our mind and heart and soul, and come truthfully into the divine presence. But the formative and expressive dimensions of Christian worship are dependent upon the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. There must be a vulnerable receptivity to truth in the "innermost being." In this sense, the deepest matters of mind and heart are at stake. Thus, there are permanent tensions in the act of worship. Since worship focuses on God, requires deep and sustained biblical memory, yet always employs human cultural means and asks truthfulness and discernment of the Spirit, tensions are internal to the worshipping assembly.

Human Being Fully Alive as Worshipper

Consider Irenaeus's proposal that the glory of God is the human being fully alive. This is not so much a natural given, but is a graced gift of the Holy Spirit. If the divine glory is the source of the world's beauty and is found in human form supremely in the Incarnate One, Jesus Christ, then glory is a gift of the Incarnation. The human image of God restored in Jesus Christ is thus the key to our ascribing glory to God. Worship is a reception and a continuing rehearsal of that gift; as St. Augustine observed, when we stretch out our hands to receive the Eucharist, "it is your own mystery you receive." To receive the free offer of grace in Christ is to be "open to glory," in and through the human means.

But now we must ask: What comes to mind when we speak of the glory in a service of Worship? Much depends upon the context, of course. For example, I have participated in very formal, well-planned worship in which everything was done with impeccable good taste and order, yet which seemed remote from any genuine communal engagement with the holiness and glory of God. Persons in that congregation spoke of the fine integrity of the worship in the way we speak of a well planned, “no surprises” concert or lecture series. I came away admiring the aesthetics of the service, but also with a sense of not having worshiped God in spirit and in truth, much less having participated in a transcendent glory become human. We can admire the prayers and the music and the well-crafted sermon, yet without praying with our whole life, or without having encountered a word other than our own values “well-dressed.” So we should not be surprised that some congregations expect worship to ask too much of mind and heart. In such cases “glory” seems missing, or simply domesticated. With no encounter with wonder and awe, worship provides nothing beyond the cultural means well done in good taste.

At the same time, we are all familiar with the opposite case. Here is a service of worship full of excitement, friendly stories, upbeat music, relaxed informal prayer, and comfortable environment. All of this we experience, yet without any sense that Jesus Christ was present in such a way that we could “behold his glory” (as in the Johannine prologue). For this requires encounter with the light of Christ’s passion. That such worship has vitality and energy we have no doubt. But without the mystery and astounding humanity of God in Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, we see and touch no glory. Irenaeus’s wonderful claim that the human being at full stretch is the glory of God requires worship that goes beyond the polite arrangement of our cultural means, worship that touches down deeply in our human yearnings beyond our immediate feelings.

Worship in a Mass Media Culture

What bearing do images of the human found in current culture have upon liturgical participation and the sense of divine glory? Or, put more broadly, how do we celebrate Word and sacrament in a mass media culture fueled by hype and driven by the ubiquity of entertainment needs? In particular, I focus for a moment on the projected world of multiple desires, immediacy of feeling, and the dissipation of attentiveness. These, I contend, lead to the loss of the capacity for awe and wonder and mystery—the very capacities needed for acknowledgement of the divine holiness and glory. Overstimulation of the senses at every turn makes it increasingly difficult for us to distinguish between *immediacy of feeling* something and *depth of emotion over time*. Preoccupation with how we “feel” about anything and everything right now is part of this difficulty. We speak about what “grabs” our attention, and we complain about diminishing attention spans. Seasons of our lives are marked by football frenzy and basketball mania. Entertainment is literally without end at our channel surfing, internetting fingertips.

In his book, *Seeing Through the Media*, Michael Warren presents a persuasive account of how, in a television and film dominated popular culture, many of us perceive ourselves and our social world through commodified images. Not only are we formed in particular images of what it is to be human, but the very means by which we imagine ourselves living in a society are at stake. The patterning of our perception

of felt-life is undergoing complex and subtle changes. Warren speaks of how we construct our role in society and our self-images. Culture itself is “a signifying system by which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored.” This definition could well be applied to Christian worship. In that case, however, the point would be to clarify the practices and the forms of memory and perception that envision and sustain the social order called the Kingdom of God. This suggests, of course, a way to explore the conflict of cultures when we ask how Christian worship can compete with the images and even the ritualized mediations of reality that constitute the culture of hype and entertainment immediacy many of us inhabit.

Our social forms of mass communication impact what we bring to the worshiping assembly. Indeed, they may alter the cultural forms we employ in worship, mentioned above. So the marketing strategies with images, visual and acoustical, tend to blur the lines between news broadcasts, sitcoms, advertising, and on-the-spot reporting (think of “real TV”!). The impact of electronic media-saturated culture differs significantly from folk cultures and the deeper human media of the arts. The latter have deep tap roots in common work, struggle, pain, and joy. The electronically mediated mass culture in North America tends to readily co-opt the visual and ritual forms that grow out of a more complex social memory that refers to sustained emotions and dispositions in human lives: gratitude, grief, wonder, joy, and hope. Perhaps one of the great rip-offs of our time is the commodification of co-option of African-American music and sensibility for marketing purposes. The same process goes on with other artistic means: Mozart, chant, and products. A recent Volvo advertisement images the plunging of a car beneath water: “This car is safe and saved.” It will save you from harm, the advertisement seems to claim—as baptism used to be believed to do.

It is one thing to bemoan such developments, quite another to find a way to resist such cultural forces. It is too easy to fault the pragmatic importation of means of expression in a culture of hype, immediacy, and commodification. Are there resources available to the Christian community that may assist in deepening our sense of awe and wonder for the renewal of our receptivity to the glory and holiness of God in worship?

A Barthian Clue and Pastoral Work Before Us

I have argued that it is the very nature of authentic Christian worship to ascribe glory and holiness to God. My impression is that in our current cultural context, many congregations are starving for it in a culture of entertainment and emotional immediacy. This is at the heart of our theological and pastoral work: to *reconnect* the language of divine glory in our gathered assemblies to the *practices*, liturgical and ethical, that form us in the capacity to live before God and neighbor at full stretch. God’s glory is lavished upon the world in Jesus Christ. Our vocation is to acknowledge that and to receive it into our congregational forms of life.

Karl Barth’s discussion of glory may give us a theological clue. He speaks of the glory of God not as one attribute among others, but as “the self-revealing sum of all divine perfections... It is God’s being in so far as this is in itself a being which declares itself.” God has penetrated the darkness of creation. Just as light reveals what is hidden, and what is real obscured by the dark, so Jesus Christ is the Light to the hidden glory of God in all creation. Worship is the recognition and acknowledgment of this astonishing wonder. In this way “God’s glory is the answer evoked by [God] of the worship offered...by the creatures.” The divine glory is the indwelling joy of His divine

being which as such shines out...which overflows in itself richness, which in its superabundance...communicates itself." All creatures have being in this very movement of the divine self-glorification. Thus, I contend, worship is the explicit remembering and acknowledging in praise and thanksgiving of this reality. It is the practice of doxological beholding of the divine, and the attending to that Word which speaks of this as the destiny of all things. This implies a resistance to all that diminishes our amazement of the divine mercy and justice. This implies that our worship avoid the dishonest, the ersatz and "manufactured," the humanly pompous and the presumptive.

This is the destiny which [human beings] received and lost, only to receive it again in Christ inconceivably and infinitely increased by the personal participation of God even against sin, the meaning even of [God's] holiness...is that God is glorious, and that glory does not allow itself to be diminished... This is what is expected from all creation because this is the sources from which they come.

There is so much more contained in the "Holy, holy, holy" than we imagine. "Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee" I sang as a child, not fully recognizing that the "Merciful and mighty God in three persons" would enter into every aspect of my life. Let us then ask, as a counterpoint to the cultural captivities of our time and place, where hopes are born. Where are all the deep resolutions of soul to be given words and wings? Where do we take our fears, our hatred, our old enmities? What things done together make human beings say, "a sign of God is here"? It may be helpful now to ask what form of life our community shares outside the rooms of liturgy that make possible a renewal of that acclamation. What shall prompt us to hear again the angelic ascription of "glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all of good will"?

Perhaps we need to find our way past self-preoccupations to see the glory of God in the humblest things, and to see the glory and sanctity of Christ's dying and rising in every human face, and in all life for which we pray. Let doxology commingle with honest lamentation and sustained intercession. Let honesty of preaching commingle with the sacramental self-giving of Christ in the common meal. Let our gatherings about the Book, the font, and the table be the very word and lavish living in our ministries to the world in which God's hidden glory awaits our witness and care.⁷

Notes

¹ See Michael Warren, *Seeing Through the Media* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997).

² Warren, 11.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957), 643.

⁴ Barth, 647.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Barth, 648.

⁷ This essay is a slightly different version of the lecture Saliers gave at Columbia Theological Seminary's Colloquium in April, 2000.