
The Shape of Worship: Praise, Word and Response

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Ross Langmead

Worship on a hike

I have always loved hiking, and Wilson's Promontory has always been one of my favourite places. I clearly remember one occasion when my friends and I held a worship service on one of our hikes over several days. It was a clear and sunny Sunday morning, and we decided to hold a communion service on a large rock overlooking one of the beautiful bays on the Eastern side of the Prom.

I'll tell you what we did. One of us prayed a prayer of praise. We didn't have a Bible with us, so we decided to sit in silence for a few minutes, meditating on the wonder of God the Creator. We then celebrated the Lord's Supper by breaking dry biscuits and passing a water flask around, pretty informally, I must say. We finished with one of us praying for others and praying that as we walked we would journey with God and stay aware of God.

The whole service took less than twenty minutes. It doesn't take long to distribute communion when there are only four people present! But what we did actually fitted into a shape of worship that has been around in various versions for two thousand years. I tend follow a very simple form of this ancient tradition, in three parts: Praise, God's Word and Response.

On the bush walk, the praise part consisted of a simple prayer. You could possibly include the silent meditation on the amazing beauty of the Prom as praise and adoration too. Or you could see it as fitting the next part of worship, which is being open to God's Word. Normally this includes the Bible reading, the sermon and communion. We didn't have a Bible reading or sermon, but we allowed God to speak to us through creation, because that was the context in which we found ourselves. On that day, it was God's Word to us.

When it comes to communion, I will openly confess that I'm very flexible about the elements. Jesus appears to have picked up what was in front of him—two staples of an ordinary Jewish meal, bread and wine—and treated them symbolically. Our two staples were dry biscuits and water, so that's what we used. Communion is a way of hearing Jesus' gracious call to us to sit at his table and experience his presence.

Our prayer for others and our 'going out' prayer were our response to God's Word. Having gathered to praise God, having heard God's Word to us through creation and through communion, our response was to commit our family, friends and the world to God, and to leave our little worship service committed to remain aware of God's presence.

This example shows that we can express the shape of worship in vastly different ways, whether short or long, whether formal or informal, while still following the time-honoured shape of praise, hearing the Word and responding.

Worship

I should make it clear that today I'm talking about worship services. I know that we also worship God in our daily life. To worship means to give honour, or to glorify and praise. In Romans 12 we are called to offer our whole lives as worship to God. I'm rather passionate about worship in daily life. I'm keen not to separate Sunday worship from Monday-to-Saturday worship.

But a worship service is an *event*. It focuses our worship. It's something we do together regularly, because we are the church. We come together to declare the saving power of God and allow it to become a reality in our hearts, in our community and in our lives out in the world. You'll notice that my definition is broader than simply saying that worship is praise. I'm suggesting that it *includes* praise, but also includes hearing the Good News, hearing the call to discipleship and responding as a community in commitment and looking outward.

In some circles the term 'worship' has become so narrow that it refers only to songs of praise. I'm suggesting that we need to be careful not to let our services be reduced to being thankful and revelling in love and feeling good. The gospel is both grace and call. It calls us to respond in costly commitment, to bring the brokenness of the world into the circle of God's love and to be part of God's ongoing mission to the world. Worship needs to nourish an outward-looking faith and serve us in the nitty-gritty as well as, at times, transporting us away from the messiness of life.

I would go as far as saying that the way we worship expresses our worldview. What we do regularly together becomes the ritual that shapes and expresses the way we see the world.

Being even more specific, there is an ancient Latin saying, which I won't try to say, which means "We believe according as we worship" [*lex adorandi est lex credendi*].¹ In other words, we express our theology by the way we worship.

For example, if our worship turns away from the world, we are saying in effect that God invites us, in turn to God, to leave the world behind. If our worship brings all of life before God, we are saying in effect that God invites us to be part of God's transforming mission in the world.

The three-part shape of worship

Let's look in a little more detail at the shape of worship I'm suggesting.

¹ Alan Richardson, 'Worship', in *A new dictionary of theology*, eds. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), 606.

In really simple terms, a worship service moves from “God is great and God is here” to “God reaches out to us with Good News” and “We respond in the Spirit”.

The shape of worship also expresses the simple fact that we gather, we encounter God and then we disperse again. Worship brings us into a focused space where we are open to God’s Word, and then we are sent out again to serve in the world

It reminds us of the Trinity, God as three-in-one: We come to praise God the Creator, to open ourselves to hear God’s Good News in Jesus Christ, and respond as the church empowered by the Holy Spirit.

It also reminds us of the history of God at work in the world, or what we might call salvation history: We celebrate the God who made the world and saw that it was good, while acknowledging that sin has spoiled it. We open our minds to hear the Good News that God has acted and still acts in Jesus Christ to save us and transform us. And we respond to the gospel call as a community that goes out in the Spirit and continues God’s mission to transform the world, encouraged by Christian hope for the future.

Praise

What are some of the elements of the first part of worship, which I’ve called, for simplicity, ‘praise’?

It usually includes elements of gathering, or approach. In many of our services there is a call to worship. It may be a short Bible passage or an invitation. It may remind us why we have gathered. It may declare the generous invitation of God to be aware of God’s presence (note that I didn’t say ‘come into God’s presence’). Speaking for myself, I really value it when the call to worship acknowledges that we come from a variety of places and life situations and moods. We have gathered; this is significant.

We may then pray a prayer of praise or adoration, and sing a praise song. I think that this is where many churches are pretty strong. At my church I have had to occasionally remind an inexperienced worship leader that this is the place for songs of praise, not songs of quiet petition or commissioning to service.

If I have any caution to our churches, it is that we examine our songs for the adequacy of their theology.

For example, some contemporary songs are very individualistic—all about ‘I’ or ‘me’—instead of reflecting the corporate nature of the church’s worship, emphasised so often in Paul’s letters in the New Testament—‘we’ and ‘us’.

As another example, some praise songs focus more on us than on God: “We are going to praise you”, rather than “You have created us and loved us”. Some even go as far as focusing on the benefits we confidently expect from God, instead of consisting of pure adoration, in which God is seen as worthy of unconditional praise.

One aspect of the approach to worship that many churches neglect is confession and absolution (declaring God's forgiveness). This has been part of the liturgy of the church since the very beginning, but many evangelical churches these days have dropped it.

It's important because as we approach the God who is holy it is appropriate that we realise our sin and unworthiness—we could not approach God except for the gracious invitation of God. As we celebrate God's good world we realise that our relationship with God is deeply fractured. This is the bridge to the second part of worship, in which we open ourselves to how God deals with sin and brokenness.

It's also important because so many of us—I would even dare to say 'most of us'—come to worship dealing with life's brokenness and feeling its turmoil and even discouragement. If worship begins with praise, and the mood is up, and everyone is bright and positive, without the opportunity to acknowledge sin and brokenness, then worship may leave many of us behind, wondering why we can't match the spirituality of those around us. It helps if worship is real and grounded, not demanding that we pretend.

A prayer of confession followed by a declaration of God's forgiveness is very helpful, and is often forgotten

Just a word on absolution. We Protestants have rejected individual confession as a regular practice, and I sense that many feel hesitant about any service leader declaring God's forgiveness as if they are taking on the role of priest. But it is not we who absolve each other; we are simply reminding each other of the wonderful promises God makes to us. We may, for instance, read the words of 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The Word

We could say that the first part of worship is a move by us towards God, though even our approach is in response to God's invitation.

The second part of worship is clearly where God addresses us. It is the hearing of God's Word, which comes to us in various ways.

To be specific about God's Word, firstly, we hear it through the Bible. Then, as John 1 tells us, the Word of God is Jesus Christ himself. And thirdly, whenever we discern that God is inviting us, calling us, addressing us, we call it God's Word to us. This might be in a sermon, where a preacher tries hard to understand a Bible passage or a theme and prays that his or her reflections will become the Word of God.

So the elements of the part of worship where we open ourselves to God addressing us might include the Bible readings, the sermon, perhaps a time of silent reflection, songs which express God's call to us to respond in discipleship, and finally, the Lord's Supper. As I'm sure you've often heard, we adults sometimes hear God most clearly through the children's talk! How often, after a well-crafted and plain-speaking kids' talk, do we feel the sermon was superfluous!

At Westgate we approach the sermon time in a variety of ways. Sometimes we interview someone or invite them to give their testimony, because God speaks to us so often in story-form. It might be about their life experience. The speaker might be a Burmese refugee whose faith in God has survived being in danger, fleeing their village and being cooped up in a refugee camp for years. It might be about their daily work, relating where they find God in their work as a nurse, or IT manager or teacher. Sometimes we have a guest, whether from Global interAction or another group, and God's Word to us on that day is specific and focused.

And sometimes, recognising how fast and noisy life is for many of us, we read the Bible and then allow ten minutes of silent reflection on it, maybe with a guiding question to think about.

Occasionally we have an outdoors service, at the nearby park. We celebrate God's creation and allow God to speak to us through it, just as my friends and I did on our hike.

The Lord's Supper is, of course, a way of declaring the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection for us. It is a time in which God invites us to sit at table with Jesus, to share in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It reminds us of the suffering. It reminds us of our hope for the future. It reminds us of how central the table of hospitality is in the Christian life. It is a grounded ceremony, using real bread and real grape juice or wine.

Churches differ in the way they approach it. At Westgate we usually begin the Lord's Supper by inviting all who wish to explore what it means to follow Jesus to join him at the table. This includes children. This includes seekers and doubters. But those who are not on this journey generally choose not to take part.

I'd like to emphasise here that to adopt the three-part shape of worship is not to be locked into a complicated liturgy. The liturgical traditions such as the Eastern Orthodox churches, Roman Catholic churches, Anglican churches and (to a lesser extent) the Uniting Church include quite a few elements leading up to communion, which we don't usually include. But we are free to do so if we wish. I wonder if your Baptist church ever prays the Lord's Prayer? Does it ever say any of the historic Christian creeds, which have united the worldwide church since the fourth or fifth centuries?

The second part of worship is the part when we hear God's call to us. I would be disappointed if it didn't include both the message of grace *and* of call, of comfort *and* of discomfort, of free forgiveness *and* costly discipleship. The gospel is all about losing our lives in order to really gain life, so both sides are involved—taking up the cross as well as accepting God's bountiful gifts of freedom and new life.

Response

When it comes to the third part of worship, our response, I often feel that the way we often do it in churches is rather narrow, and limited to an internal response, what we might call a vertical response—between God and me.

But in response to the Word of God it is the church as a whole that responds. It is the church that picks up its call and begins to look outwards. It begins by affirming its identity as a community, hearing community news, praying for each other, and passing the peace. It even includes the offering, which is a response to God's generosity and a commitment to the ministry of the church. In smaller congregations it might even include discussing the sermon. When you think about it, a sermon is a lousy way to educate, or engage people. It's a monologue, with no come back, no discussion questions, no guarantee that anyone actually stayed awake for it all.

Our response includes praying for each other and then world. I have been to church services where there has been no intercessory prayer. It has felt as if the whole service existed for us to get high on God, but then we've not responded to the call to mission, the call to pray for the world, the call to be the church.

At Westgate we have extremely moving prayers for the world and each other, which often move me to tears. Many in the congregation are from Burma; they might not have much English, and they might have been through incredible hardship. So we use tapers and a sandbox. No words are required. We invite people to come forward and to voice their prayers only if they want to, and in whichever language they want to. Sometimes people are silent, but we see their tears. Often children and teenagers come forward, even the coolest teenagers who take part in no other part of worship services.

In smaller churches you can allow anyone to get up and share community news. At our church it reminds us how much is going on and what a variety of ministries there are. Personal joys and sorrows are shared. Part of our response to God's Word is to share and care and form a new community which is the body of Christ.

This is the time to sing songs of discipleship, commitment, service, fellowship, mission and life in the Spirit, not a time to return again simply to praise.

This time of response is intrinsically forward-looking. It strains at the future, longing for God to come in fullness. It lives in the space between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. It is intensely missional, accepting that we have been called to participate in God's mission. It expresses the overall belief that worship and mission are interlinked because in worship we declare that God has acted, is acting and will act, not least through us responding in mission.

And then, finally, our response is to turn outwards again. We have gathered, we have heard, and now we disperse for ministry and mission.

We might say or sing a benediction, that is, a parting blessing. We might send each other out, commissioning each other to do God's work. You may know that the Catholic term for the Mass comes from the final words of the liturgy—*Ite, missa est*—which means, "Go, the dismissal is made". Or as one writer has suggested, "Dismissed! Get out into the world".

If the response is broad enough to encompass several dimensions—our internal response, the affirmation of community and the sending out of the church in the power of the spirit—then a full-bodied response it is indeed. Worship will have meant

something. We will have been uplifted in praise, we will have been challenged and comforted by the Word of God, and we will have responded at various levels, ready to live life again in the Spirit.

Conclusion

There are many practical considerations in planning the shape of worship. At my church, even though we know that community news most appropriately fits in the response part of the service, we have it early on. Why? Because the kids and Sunday Kids' Club teachers leave the service after the kids' talk, and we don't want them to miss out.

At my church we tend to be very thematic. We align the songs with the readings and the sermon and the kids talk and the prayers. But when I lead a service, I always announce the theme twice, once at the beginning and then again ten minutes in when everyone's arrived! We have to be practical.

I understand the need to adjust the shape of services to fit various factors. In fact, I want to emphasise that the shape of worship I'm suggesting is extremely simple and flexible. Remember my friends and I followed it in a twenty-minute service on a rock at Wilson's Prom.

I've seen scholarly writing suggesting four part structures, five part structures and even twenty part structures. In the Baptist tradition—part of the 'free church' tradition—we are free to take what we find useful, and to use things some times but not all the time. We are free to include the creative arts. We are free to encourage lots of participation. We are free to sing one opening hymn or twelve opening praise songs.

But I hope that in every church we shape our worship to express the various aspects of the gospel. I hope we actually look at what the church has done for two thousand years and select the best from that tradition of liturgy and a structured worship service, using it flexibly in our freer forms. I hope that in so doing we will be saved from over-emphasising one part at the expense of the others. I hope that our worship services will naturally invite us in, challenge us in what we hear, and then send us out to serve and engage. I hope that our worship services will school us in the essential elements of the Christian life by rehearsing the divine drama in all of its fullness, week by week, so that the way we worship will truly express what we believe.

Discussion question:

What is the shape of worship at your church? Does it serve you well?