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## THE UNITIVE AND THE DIVISIVE ELEMENTS IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

As THE Church is the place where God acts and man serves, Christian worship is primarily Divine action. It moves from the Godward pole to the Godward pole. It is both inspired by God and directed toward God. It is directed toward God as He has revealed Himself to us in Christ Jesus as our gracious heavenly Father. It rises from hearts that have been regenerated by God the Holy Spirit and from mouths that He has opened in His own praise. "According to His mercy He saved us through the laver of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit which He poured upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour." Therefore, "Through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father". In Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, every building fitly framed together groweth into a holy temple in the Lord, into a habitation of God in the Spirit (Eph. ii. 17-22).

Christian worship is the response of quickened hearts to God's revelation of Himself. God has never left Himself without witnesses, giving us sunshine and rain and fruitful seasons. He has spoken unto us in divers portions and manners through the prophets. Most of all He has manifested the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ. Accordingly we "richtly worship and imbrace him by trew faith in Christ Jesus, quha is the only head of the same Kirk" (*Scots Confession*). Christian worship does not rest primarily upon the wish of man but upon the will of God. God wills to make His grace and His glory known and to call unto Himself a people to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter ii. 5).

Thus, Christian worship is not man-centred. "Public worship is the encounter of Christ with His people" and its effect depends not on uniformity of liturgy, but on the fact that "the risen Lord has bound Himself to the institution of His worshipping Church".<sup>1</sup> "The primary ground for the church service [worship] lies outside ourselves. It lies in the presence

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Otto A. Piper, in *Crisis Christology* (Fall 1945), pp. 14-16.

and action of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> From the fine studies of Prof. K. L. Schmidt and Dr. R. N. Flew our European collaborators properly concluded that “The one Church of God is . . . the sphere of action of the heavenly Christ; all its members being in Christ and being knit together by a supernatural kinship; all their gifts and activities continuing the work of Christ, originating from Christ and being co-ordinated by Christ to the final result”.<sup>2</sup>

In His ascended presence Christ is the High Priest of our profession ministering in the true tabernacle that God pitched and not man. The Captain of our salvation is the Leader of Christian worship, “continuing to manage the cause of the whole Church before God”, “transacting all things with God” for her.<sup>3</sup> His sacrifice of Himself for us was “itself a stupendous act of prayer and an amazing tribute of praise”. “He worshipped God in laying down His life upon the altar. He worshipped Him in taking it again, and it was an act of worship by which He entered with His blood into the very presence of the Highest to intercede for the saints.”<sup>4</sup> As He graciously mingles His heavenly worship with our feeble and unworthy tribute of praise and thanksgiving, the prayers of the saints find acceptance upon the golden altar before the Throne. We fallen sinners worship God in and through the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. His continuing intercession is not the manifestation of two conflicting wills in the Most High, but this heavenly dialectic does show God to be a just God at the same time that He is a gracious Saviour. On the ground of Christ’s presentation of Himself as] that Lamb slain for the sins of the world, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The Son of Man walks in the midst of the Churches holding them like stars in His hand and governing them by the sword out of His mouth. By the messengers of the several Churches the incarnate Word speaks His own Word to His people as they preach Christ from the Holy Scriptures. By His resurrection Christ became the life-giving Spirit and continues the affusion of the Holy Spirit He began at Pentecost. “Where Christ sat not at the right hand of God, nor daily poured forth His Spirit,

<sup>1</sup> K. Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> World Conference on Faith and Order, No. 92, p. 69; cf. p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Works of John Owen* (London, 1826), XII. 325.

<sup>4</sup> Thornwell’s *Collected Writings* II: 419, 281.

the Christian faith could not exist. . . . Where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit kept not continual guard, the devil would not let a single man abide by the Easter preaching and by faith in Christ" (Luther).

Invested with the Spirit, seated at the right hand of power, holding the plan of the ages in His nail-pierced hand, girt with the panoply of glory, the Redeemer is now administering the counsels of redemption for the salvation of His people. The Conqueror of death is pressing the mission which spreads God's reign from sea to rolling sea. The courageous witness of the European Churches under Nazi domination, said Dr. Warnshuis, "springs from their discovery that Christ reigns, not that He will reign. He reigns now. He is today the King of kings. History is in the hands of the invisible Lord. Hitler does not know it. The world does not know it. The Church knows that there is ONE who is stronger than the Fuehrer. This is not hypothetical, but a basic certainty. . . . The Church has had a sense of superiority because it possessed knowledge of a secret, the universal Lordship of Christ. This knowledge has given the Church a courage that will accept no compromise".

"The Church is one in that all are members of the one Body of which Christ is the Head."<sup>1</sup> And "the key to true unity is: to grow up together in Him Who is the Head of the Church".<sup>2</sup> This union in Christ points the way to true unity in and through worship. Christ is not only Lord at the right hand of the Father reigning there as the Son of David, our Brother and our Head. He is also the true Lord in every congregation that meets in His name. The Holy Spirit is His vicegerent taking the things of Christ and showing them to us. This Witnesser of Jesus' merit works faith in our hearts and thereby unites us to Christ in our effectual calling. That which matters most in the Lord's Supper, in the preaching of the Word, in Christian baptism is the work of the Holy Spirit. He uses these media of God's ordering to bring Christ to the people. By one Spirit are we all baptised into the one body of Christ. He builds the Church upon the waters of regeneration and feeds her upon the Bread of Life. Under His blessing, "faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ". "God's Holy Spirit speaks and may be heard at the

<sup>1</sup> Principal Richard Davidson, *The Nature of the Church*, p. 56. Cf. Calvin. *Institutes* IV. 1, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Visser 't Hooft, in *The World Council Courier*, 5: 3.

place where He has His dwelling and from which He comes to us, namely, in Jesus Christ as the Word of God."<sup>1</sup>

The ultimate condition for unity in and through Christian worship is the recognition that the primary ground, the primary content and the primary form of Christian worship is Divine activity, and the continual effort to conform the secondary or human ground, content, and form of this worship to the action of God in Christ.

Since the life of the Church depends upon the people drinking of that Spiritual Rock which is Christ (1 Cor. x. 4) and the growth of the body upon each member being a joint of supply drawing grace from Him who is the fountain head (Eph. iv 15-16), therefore Christian worship is unitive in proportion as it draws the congregation to Him. Since other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus (1 Cor. iii. 11), any worship which withdraws the congregation from the Bread of God and focuses its devotion elsewhere is divisive. Those other foci may be saints or statues, current catchwords or idealistic philosophies, sets of canons or obsessions with liturgics. The Church's unity is in Jesus Christ. Her centre of gravity is the High Priest ministering in the heavenly tabernacle. As Christian worship draws the Church on earth to the Lamb in the midst of the throne and to the Church of the First-born in heaven, it is unitive.

This perpetual test faces each of our denominations and congregations. There is an interesting story from one of our Presbyterian bodies that moved from an exclusively psalm-singing to a psalm-and-hymn-using Church. When the new book was being prepared, a learned Pittsburg professor who had been reared on the beloved metrical version of the Psalms insisted that the first section of the new book of praise be given to hymns directly adoring Christ, and that even the Psalms follow this Christological section. He had come to see that Christian worship properly begins with the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ and reads everything else in the light of the knowledge of the glory of God that shines from His face.

Christian worship is unitive in proportion as it recognises and proclaims the sole Lordship of Christ in His body the Church and in her worship. It is divisive in proportion as it deflects or divides this lordship, giving part thereof to preacher or to

<sup>1</sup> Barth, as cited, p. 172.

hierarchy, to a naturalistic system which mutilates the Gospel or to an idealistic empiricism which has no essential place for the unique events of God's saving intervention, to a hue and cry for His body to yoke itself to the chariot in which Caesar rides, or to a diversion of her energies into a humanistic programme in lieu of His Great Commission. Barth has reminded the modern Church that the ground of Christian worship as human action is obedience. "What the Church owes the world is not her cleverness or adaptability or the attempt made in all lands at all times to suit the people's wishes, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ." "Religion with its masterpieces is one thing, Christian faith with its obedience another."<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly the Church is to enquire of the Word as to the media God has ordained for His own worship. In the Word she finds Jesus and His apostles preaching and teaching the Gospel. Thus Luther says: "Hearing the Word of God contains the most promises and hearing it is the most pleasing to God, and the highest worship whereby we can honour him."<sup>2</sup> Calvin adds that the removal of the Word signifies the departure of the Lord. As the work of Christ culminated in his atoning death so for the first Christians the liturgy of the Word culminated in the liturgy of the Upper Room whereby the Holy Spirit carries us by faith above things that are visible, carnal, and earthly and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus. Moreover, we recognise that other great seal of the Word as a true part of congregational worship and declare that "be baptism we ar ingrafted in Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his justice, be quhilk our sinnes ar covered and remitted" (*Scots Confession*, Art. xxi).

As our congregations seek the Lordship of Christ in the obedience of Christian worship, we find our common origin in the Crucified and Risen Redeemer, our common faith and experience wrought by His one gracious Spirit, through the instrumentality of the Word and the sacraments and the prayers and praise of God's people. We find a unity which even death cannot sever, since the Church on earth is a true, if imperfect, part of the Church above, received in and by virtue of the merits of her Saviour and Head.

In drawing closer to Him in whom we are one we draw

<sup>1</sup> Barth, *ibid.*, pp. 208, 206.

<sup>2</sup> Luther, *The Sum of the Christian Life*.

closer to one another and have no right to think lightly of any means by which our brethren have been united and lifted in Christian worship. In *The Coming Great Church*, Canon T. O. Wedel says that the Protestant Church has made much of the Gospel and of the congregation, but has not sufficiently appreciated the historical liturgy. At the present time there is a movement in my own and similar bodies to appropriate more of the heritage of historic Christian worship. We are interested in the Church year, in the general thanksgiving and the general confession, in more frequent celebrations of Holy Communion, in baptism as an act of congregational worship, in the Creed, the Gloria, the Te Deum. There is an increasing sense of churchliness in our services. The ministers of the Word are coming to recognise themselves as shepherds of the flock to whom members can freely come for personal counselling. Some of us do not find this out of keeping with our own history, when we remember that Calvin required each member of his congregation in Strassburg to come to the pastor for conference before coming to the Table of the Lord, that he celebrated the Supper more frequently than was customary among the Roman Catholic people, and that he desired its celebration more frequently than the Council of Geneva permitted.

We would, however, consider these practices of our more liturgical brethren on the basis of our primary premises: our unity in Christ and our obedience to Him. Will the introduction of this or that ancient prayer or chant or creed or response into our worship draw us closer to our Lord or will this so-called aid to worship attract attention to itself and so deflect it from the true object of worship? It is probable that even a Low-Church Episcopal service could not be immediately introduced into many of our Southern Presbyterian congregations without distracting the minds of the worshippers from the heavenly High Priest. Every proposed enrichment of the liturgy also properly comes under the test of the obedience of the Christian faith. There is a presupposition in favour of an act of worship that God's true people through the ages have found bringing them closer to their Lord either in confession or in adoration. This testimony is not to be lightly esteemed. But it is to be tested to find out whether it is an act authorised in the Word for the Church or merely introduced by man's ingenuity. The only true Christian unity is under the sole reign of Christ the King. Therefore,

we must ever seek to tread the courts of His house in a worship that is of His ordering. And as we do so, we recognise that the risen Head of the Church is blessing other branches of the one vine as they worship the Triune God in forms not identical with ours.

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