

THE USE OF THE BIBLE IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

On a superficial basis it is easy to see the place of the Bible in Christian worship. It is the source of the readings - the Old Testament, psalm, Epistle and Gospel passages - that precede the sermon, and give the preacher his or her text for the day's message. Genuine authority in Christian community is always grounded in the Bible; and the Bible most clearly exhibits its authority in the gathering where it is read, sung, preached and enacted.¹ It is that, but it is also much more. As Gordon Lathrop has said, "the Bible marks and largely determines Christian corporate worship."²

The Bible is physically present, often prominently placed on a central reading stand. Moreover, we sometimes also give a ceremonial preface to the reading by carrying the book and honouring it. However, it is not only read and interpreted, it is also the source of the imagery, and much of the form and quality of the language in prayers, chants, and hymns.³ Indeed, snatches of old biblical letters are scattered throughout the service; in canticles, responsories, collects and prayers. Moreover, Biblical images and texts often adorn the worship space.

As Lathrop says, perhaps the most common way in which we identify corporate worship as biblical is that we do what the bible tells us to do, the actions that Jesus instituted.⁴ We meet for worship, pray together in praise and intercession, and hold a meal. We teach the faith to those who would join community, and then bathe them. The gathering for scripture, interpretation and prayer is much like the synagogue service in Jesus' time. Set next to this liturgy of the Word is a little meal -

¹ Gordon W. Lathrop, Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 9.

² Ibid, 15.

³ Ibid.

⁴ ibid, 20

not a full supper, but the breaking of the bread from the beginning of the Jewish meal, and the passing of the cup of blessing from its end. To eat this meal in community is to continue what began in the life of Jesus. We do this for the memory of Him, using the biblical description of the last supper as our Eucharistic Prayer, and the words Jesus uttered as He broke the bread and blessed the cup as our words of institution. For the community the meal is the very presence of Christ himself in our midst, each and every time we do it.

This is the classic structure of the Christian meeting – word and table – the 52 ritual foci of texts with preaching and thanksgiving before eating food for the journey.⁵ The juxtaposition of these foci is the root of the ongoing pattern of our worship. They are biblical patterns not so much because we can find New Testament warrant for them, but because their structure corresponds to biblical meaning.

The public reading of the Bible in the service discharges two functions that are more central than teaching the congregation. It is kerygmatic, in that it proclaims the gospel; and it is doxological, in that it is a vehicle by which thanks and praise can be offered to God for what he is and what he has done.⁶ The Bible is read not so much to inform but to inspire and to express praise and celebration.

Barton notes it is important to realize that the Bible is the vehicle for the Word of God, rather than being identical with it. God's word is communicated, and touches the mind and the heart, through the reading and exposition of scripture, but the words of scripture are not the sum total of his Word.⁷

Lathrop amplifies this, noting that the assembly juxtaposes an old book and a present people.⁸ By reading the biblical texts as if they were

⁵ Lathrop, 52.

⁶ John Barton, *People of the Book?: The Authority of the Bible in Christianity*, (London: SPCK, 1993), 74.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lathrop, 6.

ours, we are given a story, an origin, an orientation in the world. The liturgical intention is that texts speak to us now not just of ourselves and our history, but of God's action and grace; to manifest the presence of God in the assembly.⁹ In Lathrop's words, "Ancient texts are used to speak a new grace: this is the liturgical pattern for the use of the Bible"¹⁰ The biblical stories mediate to us an entirely new thing beyond all texts. They are read as if they were the concrete medium for the encounter with God. They speak NOW of the presence of God's grace amongst us.

The role of preaching on the biblical texts is to make available to us the old things of text and ritual as images and words that speak the truth of our condition - our world, our lives and our death, our alienation and our need - more deeply than had before occurred to us. The purpose is to cause a crisis in those words; so that the present grace of God is spoken in the terms of our old lives and we ourselves are saved. As Lathrop said, "Here in the assembly and in preaching, a new thing is to be said, destroying and re-creating ourselves and our world."¹¹

It is not just reading and preaching that propose this pattern, but also the sacramental actions, the metaphoric chains of liturgical poetry, the ritual action set next to ritual word, and the singing around the texts. All the juxtapositions of liturgy call us to trust in the biblical pattern, reinterpreting our world. God is the one who brings something out of nothing, life out of death, the new out of old.¹²

In the introduction to the Book of Alternative Services we are told, "Liturgy is not the gospel but it is a principal process by which the Church and the gospel are brought together for the sake of the life of the world."

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⁹ Lathrop, 18.

¹⁰ Ibid, 19.

¹¹ Ibid, 32.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, The Book of Alternative Services, (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 10.

Even our pattern of Christian prayer is rooted in biblical and Jewish patterns. Biblical prayer praises God by acknowledging and recounting His deeds. On the grounds of this acknowledgement, we the people beseech His faithfulness and beg Him to remember His promises. This is the pattern of our prayer within the service; the intercessions that follow the scriptures and preaching, the eucharistic prayer itself, the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to say, and even in the classic collects that mark certain turns in the service. These prayers hold together both praise and petition surrounded by a formula address and concluding doxology.¹⁴

To come into the meeting is to come into a world determined by the language of the Bible. Indeed, it permeates our entire worship service.

¹⁴ Ibid, 57.

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