

Roots of Reformed Worship

A Publication of Echo Hills Christian Study Center
P.O. Box 543 Indian Head, PA 15446-0543
No. 1, © November 1997

Reformed Christians have always been passionately concerned about worship. The regulative principle of worship is one of the distinctives of Presbyterian churches. It is a commitment to be governed only by the Word of God in the substantial issues of worship. This commitment has caused Reformed Christians to divide, not only from the Anglicans, but from one another with regard to acceptable worship. It may seem surprising, therefore, that the study of worship has not been a major concern among conservative Presbyterians in the Twentieth Century. But it has not! Fortunately, in the providence of God, others have given considerable attention to the history and theology of Christian worship. Since the middle of this century there has been a growing community of scholars who have been investigating the spectrum of Christian liturgies from Orthodoxy's *Divine Liturgy of St. Chrysostom* to the worship orders of such reformers as Calvin, Bucer, Knox and Zwingli.

One of the goals of Echo Hills Christian Study Center is to bring the fruits of these studies to the Reformed passion for worship that is according to the Word of God. With this in mind, Echo Hills offers this first in a series of essays on the historical origins and development of Reformed worship. The goal is to foster not only an understanding of the past, but a consideration of the biblical theology and pastoral implementation of worship. We begin our story with the earliest of the Reformed reformers, Ulrich Zwingli.

Zwingli was a priest in the Swiss city of Zurich. In 1518 He began to preach through the entire New Testament. His method was to intersperse epistles with gospels beginning with *St. Matthew*. This biblical exposition excited a desire among many of the citizens of Zurich for the reform of the Latin Mass. Zwingli's initial effort at reform was entitled *An Attack upon the Canon of the Mass* published in 1523. Zwingli's criticisms and proposals were focused on that portion of the Mass known as the Canon. In the West the prayer over the bread and cup in the Lord's supper portion of the liturgy had come to be divided between an

introduction and a main section that was required to be said *verbatim*. This standardized prayer was called the Canon from the Greek word meaning rule (κανων). Between the Preface and the Canon was response that combined the seraphim's song (Isaiah 6:3) and the chant of the crowds at the triumphal entry (Mark 11:9).

The core of the Canon was very ancient. But the Canon of the Mass had also come to express the latter doctrines of Christ's bodily presence (real presence) and the continuation of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice in the Mass. These later doctrinal expressions were not only in the form of new paragraphs added to the ancient core, but also were an intermingling of new ideas with ancient formulas, giving to those ancient formulas meanings it is doubtful that they had at their inception. For example, the bread and cup are called "a holy offering, a victim without blemish." This phrase was a latter addition that combined older terminology with a new idea. Calling the elements an offering was very ancient, but adding that they were a victim without blemish reflects the developing medieval consensus. The result was a prayer that Zwingli, a Latin stylist, found to be appalling Latin. Furthermore, like Martin Luther, he despaired of revising the Canon to make it theologically acceptable. As a result he dispensed with the Canon entirely. In its place he set four prayers in Latin of his own composition following the traditional Preface and Sanctus.

The first prayer recounts man's fall and Christ's redemptive sacrifice. "From this state of grace man fell through his own fault and was deemed worthy of death" but Christ "gave himself to be the perfect sacrifice of those who were lost: and not content with this, so that we might lack for nothing, he gave himself to be our food and drink." Zwingli places the idea of sacrifice entirely in the past. The present action of the supper was not to be conceived as a sacrifice, but as a spiritual feast. In the second prayer Zwingli beseeched God that those who partook would be nourished by the spiritual food of God's word. In this prayer we can see that Zwingli, in rejecting Christ's bodily presence in the supper, also

rejected any notion of a communion with his humanity. Such a conception would be so crucial to John Calvin's theology a decade or two later. In the third prayer the communion of the supper is defined as a sharing by remembering: "so we firmly believe that he offered himself to be the food of our souls under the forms of bread and wine, so that the memory of his generous deed may never be abolished." The final prayer is a request for divine aid that the recipients may "worthily and faithfully join the sacred banquet of your Son, of which he himself is both our host and our most delectable food." Interestingly, the entire service remained in Latin except for the Bible readings (lections) and sermon.

Zwingli's first effort at the reform of the Mass satisfied neither himself nor those who were advocates of the reform of the Church. In 1525 Zwingli published and proposed to the Zurich council a much more thorough reform. In *Action or Use of the Lord's Supper*, Zwingli set forth a new form for the celebration of the supper. The Mass in Latin was dispensed with completely. In its place was put a weekly preaching service that was derived neither from the Mass nor from any ancient liturgy. Instead it had its inspiration in a medieval service known as the Prone. The Lord's supper was appointed to be celebrated four times a year using the new form that Zwingli proposed in the *Action*. The times of celebration were Easter, Pentecost, Autumn and Christmas. Such a shift to quarterly celebration was both a loss and a gain. Since the medieval custom was for the faithful to actually partake of the bread only once or twice a year, a fourfold celebration where everyone was expected to participate was a significant improvement. The experience of the supper as a communal celebration, a banquet for the people of God, had been lost for a millennium in Western Christendom. Most medieval Christians merely observed the priest eat and drink. Furthermore, the services Zwingli instituted were entirely in the vernacular (in this case, German). For the first time in their lives many citizens of Zurich heard in their own language the prayers of the liturgy. They had again become participants and not just spectators and an invisible miracle. This must have been an incalculable blessing!

On the other hand, every Lord's Day liturgy from the description given by Justin Martyr (First Apology, Chapter LXVII) to Zwingli had been a union of the service of the word and the service of the supper. For the Reformed Churches, Zwingli brought this ancient custom to an end. Despite his efforts, Calvin was never able to restore the unity of word and supper that Zwingli severed with his bold stroke of the pen. Zwingli cast the mold of occasion celebration that has continued to shape the worship of the Reformed churches to this day. Besides the divorce of word and supper in the weekly

service, Zwingli also began a number of practices still with us today. Another aspect of Zwingli's reform was the omission of most of the ancient formulae of worship. Such classic liturgical pieces as the *Sursum corda* (Lift up your hearts...), the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy, Holy...), the *Kyrie* (Lord, have mercy!) and the *Agnus Dei* (O Christ, Lamb of God...) disappeared in Zurich. To this day, most Reformed services do not remind one of the ancient liturgies either in shape or phraseology.

Zwingli established the practice that the people should remain seated and the elements be brought to them by the deacons. The deacons at this time were still liturgical assistants, not ministers to the poor, as they would become in Geneva under Calvin's influence. As we noted above, the practice of preaching continuously through the books of the Bible was begun by Zwingli. Though this is not as common as it once was, only the Reformed (not the Lutherans or the Anglicans) dispensed with the lectionary structure of readings based on the church year in favor of a *lecto continua* method. At the quarterly celebrations of the Lord's supper, Zwingli's liturgy included only a prayer of humble access and the words of institution. The dominical pattern of taking the bread and giving thanks disappeared in Zwingli's reform. The same was true for the cup. Here we encounter one of the strangest liturgical customs, namely, a service of thanksgiving with no verbalized thanksgiving! The oddness of this is accentuated by the very phraseology of Zwingli's prayer of access: "O Almighty God, who by thy Spirit has brought us together into thy one body, in the unity of faith, and has commanded that body to give thee praise and thanks for thy goodness and free gift in delivering thine only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to death for our sins: grant that we may do the same..." No prayer of thanksgiving followed!

One innovation of Zwingli was not followed in the rest of the Reformed world. In Zurich not only were the organs removed from the church buildings, but even singing was banned from the service. At first Zwingli kept a responsive reading of the ancient chant *Te Deum* in his Lord's supper liturgy. After 1529 this too ceased. As a result, the service of the supper was celebrated in almost total silence! Calvin would take a very different approach. Whether Zwingli would have modified his views under the influence of Calvin we shall never know for Ulrich Zwingli was killed in battle in 1531.

Zwingli, as the first of the Reformed theologians, played a crucial role in the evolution of worship in the Reformed churches. He initially established many of the practices that would become characteristic of Reformed worship: quarterly communion, a complete break from liturgical custom in form and phraseology, communion seated, and a service

entirely in the vernacular. But this is just the beginning of the story. The reform of worship would continue in Strasbourg and in Geneva, and in those cities it would take some very different directions. ✠

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