Plenary Address A2: How Ancient Worship Became Less “Contemporary” and More “Traditional”

(Contemporary Worship in Historical Context, Part 2; Sunday, 30 June 2019, 2:30 p.m.)

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(slide 1, title slide) In my presentation yesterday, I made the following suggestion that certain sensibilities from “praise and worship” were actually part of ancient worship in the first centuries of the church even though it has been easy for recent recovery of “ancient worship” by the Liturgical Movement to miss them. And I raised the following question: what if we could envision something we could label as “ancient praise and worship” which drew on both insights from the early church and the best practices of recent “praise and worship”?

Today I would like to unpack my suggestion a bit more and answer the question more specifically by rethinking what it means to have an “ancient” order of worship. To summarize this presentation I will simply state there are qualities about “praise and worship” that can be found in the earliest description of a Christian worship service, a description from the second century. You might be surprised by this assertion that there are similarities between “praise and worship” and “ancient worship” as it was originally done. Yes, of course, the second century did not have bands with guitars and drum kits. Nor did churches at that time have the electronic technology we now use in worship. But there are certain things in “praise and worship” that can be found in very ancient worship. Today I want to describe those things and also tell the history of how they were lost. My goal is to help us see that if there are some common sensibilities between “praise and worship” and “ancient worship” then we can think about new ways of doing “praise and worship” and “ancient worship” today. There can be a fusion between the two.

First, let me speak about one of the key elements in the modern appropriation of “ancient worship,” an order of worship known sometimes as Word and Table or sometimes as the four-fold order of worship. To put into place the four-fold, Word and Table order of worship was one of the main attacks made by “ancient worship” proponents against the “traditional worship” of the mid-twentieth century.

(slide 2) This Word and Table can be called the four-fold order because it has four main parts: gathering, a time spent on the Word of God (the Bible), followed by the Lord’s Supper, and then sending. The main service in mainline denominational resources like Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian in the last forty years propose this order. And there are major worship planning resources which do the same, too. The books by Robert Webber do so as does the popular book by Constance Cherry entitled *The Worship Architect*.

For many denominations, like my own Methodist Church, this order was something new in its history, particularly as it was intended as a norm for weekly Sunday worship. Prior to the Word and Table orders of recent denominational resources, most Methodist worship, Sunday in and Sunday out, was a standard “traditional worship” order consisting of some mixture of responsive readings, congregational hymns, unison prayers, choir anthem, and pastoral prayer, all leading up to the main Scripture reading with sermon toward the end of the service. Some sort of invitation or call to discipleship, with a final hymn, concluded the service. This was the order of worship I grew up with as a small child until the four-fold Word and Table was introduced in the 1980s.

Where did this new Word and Table order come from? Like much else in the new denominational resources of the last 40 years, it came from study of the worship history of the early church. It came from the early church. Thus, it was one of the critical recoveries of those advocating “ancient worship.” One of the most foundational witnesses to this order is in what is perhaps the earliest description of an order of worship in the first centuries: Justin Martyr’s mid-second century account in his First Apology. (slide 3) Probably every worship scholar and denominational worship official knows this passage by heart:

On the day called Sunday, there is an assembling of those who live in cities or the countryside, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has stopped, the presider in a sermon admonishes and invites us to the imitation of these good things. (slide 4) Then we all stand up together and offer prayers to God. And, as we said before, when we have stopped praying, bread and wine and water are brought, and the presider sends up prayers and thanksgivings in similar fashion, to the best of his ability, and the people give their assent, saying “Amen.” And there is a distribution and a partaking by each person of the food over which thanks have been given. And the food is sent to those who are not present by means of the deacons.

Justin concludes his description noting how worshipers could contribute money so that the church could take care of those in need. Although Justin does not mention a dismissal of the people or a return of the people to their homes, surely his worship services eventually ended and people returned home.

Worshipers in churches that have recently adopted the “ancient worship” of the Liturgical Movement should recognize the basic order of the worship Justin described because it parallels the order they will see in their recent denominational books. Indeed, Justin’s description is one of the important historical sources used to shape these new orders of worship since it is one of the first descriptions of a whole service from the early church. In my own denomination, the Methodist, this new order is called “Word and Table.” Justin’s description of worship has influenced much of the recent official revision of worship resources in churches like Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian.

(slide 5) This new order has four sections that correspond to the basic sequence seen in Justin: The “entrance” of the four-fold Word and Table order corresponds to where Justin says “all gather together”; the “proclamation” or “Word” in recently printed versions of Word and Table corresponds to the multiple readings from Scripture Justin describes (the “memoirs of the apostles” and the “writings of the prophets”); in the four-fold order comes the main congregational prayers, especially intercession as well as the Lord’s Supper, which is just how Justin describes what comes after the sermon. After Communion comes the “sending” in the four-fold order. Even though Justin does not mention such a sending, there surely was a departure of the people. Recent published denominational resources fill out these four folds of “Word and Table” (entrance, Word, Table, sending) by listing and providing individual acts of worship fitting for each of the four sections.

Note the differences between this four-fold Word and Table order and the standard order of “traditional worship.” “Traditional worship” tends to place the sermon at the very end of the service with very little occurring after it. This ancient four-fold order places it in the middle of the service with plenty of congregational prayer and other worship after the sermon. “Traditional worship” tends not to have weekly communion. This ancient four-fold order of worship presumes a weekly Lord’s Supper is the norm. Indeed, it is the climax of every service. “Traditional worship” may only have a single Scripture reading and that usually occurs immediately prior to the sermon. In contrast, this ancient order presumes multiple readings chosen from across the Bible. These differences are some of the most significant differences but are not the only differences.

Given the parallels between Justin’s order of worship from the second century and recent appropriations of it in the churches wanting to promote a recovery of “ancient worship” in its order or worship, it would be easy to think that Justin Martyr’s church in the second century worshiped in the same way as modern churches that have implemented “ancient worship.” But that would be a wrong assumption.

It is easy for these modern churches implementing “ancient worship” to be fooled. The order of worship is unfamiliar enough to them that implementing it has felt like a radical change. That would be the glare of its novelty. And it is easy to look at Justin’s description of an order of worship and be mesmerized by the differences, especially in the order. Perhaps our attention is caught by the basic shape of Justin’s order, by its breadth and balance. That would be similar to me taking a quick look at a beautiful painting from a famous artist and being too quickly mesmerized by the basic shapes or the basic colors. My looking would not be wrong; it would just be incomplete.

And so I want to suggest there are three things we should notice in Justin’s description that would distinguish it from the way many modern churches often do the ancient, four-fold Word and Table order. In fact, I want to suggest that these three elements have much in common with “praise and worship.” These three elements are subtle aspects of “praise and worship.” Recognizing these three things can help us find common ground between “praise and worship” and “ancient worship.” These three things can either help us rethink how we are doing “praise and worship” by bringing in the elements we see in Justin’s order, or help us rethink how we are recovering a vision of “ancient worship” by showing a way of doing it that feels more like how “praise and worship” is done than how mid-century “traditional worship” is done.

I hope I have surprised you with this comment that Justin’s ancient worship shares three elements often found in “praise and worship.” There are new possibilities in this surprise. And I hope that the surprise has captured your attention. What are these three elements?

(slide 6) The first is an open-endedness of time. Justin speaks about the readings from the Old and the New Testaments for “as long as time permits.” The Old Testament readings he calls “the writings of the prophets” and the New Testament “the memoirs of the apostles.” We might be mesmerized by that balance and breadth: his church read from both the Old and New Testaments on Sunday. But notice the more subtle thing: the readings went on “as long as time permits.” That suggests the readings were not entirely prescribed with a clear beginning and ending for that Sunday. More importantly, it meant someone was having to determine the beginning and ending of the readings. That determination meant someone was having to discern matters of time. How would one have known that a reading had gone on long enough? Of course, there would have been natural ending points in passages but surely there was something more, a discerning of what seems fitting, right, and long enough for that particular occasion and people. In contrast, if we do an ancient order of Word and Table with a fully written-out order of worship in a bulletin or from a book, what discernment of time is needed as we progress steadily through the printed order?

(slide 7) The second is the need for extemporaneity in praying. Describing how the presider prays at the Lord’s Supper, Justin does not say he used a prescribed, written-out Communion prayer. Instead, Justin points out how the presider prayed “according to his ability,” that is, extempore or extemporaneously. With no fixed Communion consecration prayer (and, presumably, with extemporaneous prayer throughout the service), there was a fluidity, flexibility, and opportunity for variety in the content of worship. And, as anyone who has ever prayed extemporaneously will tell you, there was also that same need for the discernment of time and occasion to sense when it is time to move through the sections of a prayer and when it is time to bring it to a close. Something beyond the literacy required to read a prayer is needed to lead worship in this sort of way. In contrast, if our service of Word and Table is fully scripted with every word chosen ahead of time, the requirement for leading involves proper handling of a written text, not the shaping of prayer from the heart.

(slide 8) Finally, Justin laid out his order of worship by actions. In other words, Justin’s description envisions an order of worship as a series of essential activities that flow from one to the next. Notice all the verbs (that is, actions) he uses to describe the order: gather….read….admonish and invite…stand….offer….present….offer up….assent….distribute and receive. These activities are where Justin put the emphasis in his description of what Christian worship is. Of course, Justin does mention a few things, for example, objects like memoirs and prayers, in the order of worship but even here go beyond the surface of his words and you will see essential activities immediately below the surface. In contrast, how often have you seen people treat the printed order of worship as a list of objects that can be checked off like groceries being bought on a shopping list? (slide 9) (I have seen that done in church: someone holding their bulletin and putting a check mark every time something has been completed.)

I suggest these three elements (slide 10) (open-ended time, extemporaneity, and an understanding of worship as a flow of actions) is what provides the common ground from Justin’s form of ancient worship and our contemporary “praise and worship.” In other words, Justin’s service had a certain feel and rhythm that required those leading worship to actively discern fittingness, appropriateness, and a host of other subtle qualities in real time. The way Justin described it, the worship in his church did not move according to a completely predetermined script. As the service began, the worship leader did not simply hit the “start button” and the service unfolded precisely according to a plan.

I propose that leading Word and Table as Justin portrayed it required sensibilities similar to musicians who create a groove in a song. To make music with a groove is not simply a matter of replicating the notes and rhythm as found on a page. What good musicians do is a subtle skill by which they make the music come alive, be distinctive, and be emotionally compelling. Gifted musicians give music a groove, a term resisting easy definition. With my limited piano skills I can play the notes written on a page of music. (slide 11) My much more talented colleague, Dr. Lim Swee Hong, who is an accomplished pianist, can do much more. I can play a song. Dr. Lim can make music.

(slide 12, white slide) These qualities (open-ended time, extemporaneity, and an understanding of worship as a flow of actions) have been common in “praise and worship.” By seeing them in this foundation description in Justin Martyr of ancient worship, I am suggesting that by using them we can find a new way to do older ways of Protestant worship, whether “traditional worship” or “ancient worship.”

But what happened after Justin Martyr? How did worship lose those three qualities seen in Justin Martyr? Let me lay out that history.

After Justin Martyr in the second century, some things changed. What did not change was the shape of the basic order of worship: an initial gathering lead to a time of Scripture reading followed by a series of table-related acts of worship, culminating in the Eucharist. A dismissal ended the service. This basic order would define worship up until the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. This basic order lies behind recent revisions of the worship resources of many denominations. The order did not change.

What did change were those three elements I highlighted in Justin’s description: open-ended time, extemporaneity, and an understanding of worship as a flow of actions. Starting in the fourth century especially, the manner in which Justin’s Word and Table order was done began to change. The direction of change over the centuries generally has been away from those three elements. That has meant that, although we recently have used Justin’s description of worship to understand what we are doing in the new liturgical resources and to validate them, we have subtly interpreted his order of worship with presumptions drawn from the last 1,500 years of worship history. We have given it a different feel and a different rhythm, thus losing the groove that it originally had.

How and when did those changes happen? (slide 13) Simply put, in the centuries after Justin Martyr (remember that he was in the second century), ways of worship have tended to move from open-endedness of time to bounded time, from extemporaneity to a fully scripted liturgical text, and from the order of worship understood as a sequence of activity to a succession of liturgical objects. Of course, these changes were neither all of a sudden nor simultaneous in every place at the same time. Neither were they completely thorough in how any church at any one time worshiped, particularly in the first centuries after Justin Martyr. Nonetheless, the overall trajectories of worship history have been away from the qualities Justin highlighted, except in the case of some liturgical traditions of recent centuries.

As the Church moved from its earliest centuries into the Middle Ages (the sixth century and after), several developments launched the trajectory away from the three elements critical for how a Word and Table service was done in Justin’s description. These developments would erode the need for active discernment of time and the capability for extemporaneity. The developments would also help Christians see their order of worship as consisting of a list of objects to be done, not a sequence of unified actions.

The movement of the trajectory was slow, unfolding over centuries, but it was steady. For example, bit by bit, there was a loss of extemporaneous prayer as worship history moved from the late patristic period into the medieval. Prayers and other liturgical texts became written down, edited, combined, scrutinized, shared, and standardized as families of liturgical rites associated with large regions developed. Eventually the entire service would be scripted. These changes resulted in a tighter management of time and a much decreased need for inward discernment as to the immediate fittingness for a time and place. Leading worship by a liturgical text gives a worship leader a different relationship to the temporal rhythm of the entire service.

Similarly, the development of lectionaries organizing scripture readings (in conjunction with the development of an ever more complicated liturgical year) for each service changed worship’s relationship to time and active discernment. As the beginning and ending point of each reading was set—as well as the specific passage to be read—readers and preachers became less individually responsible for determining the length of the reading and its appropriateness for a congregation in a particular time and place. And, depending upon the particular lectionaries being used, the readings could have varying degrees of natural relatedness to each other. In other words, the multiple readings might fit well together or they might not.

Another major development was the introduction into written orders of worship of elements that were done in every service. The danger, if I may call it that, of such acts of worship is that it becomes easy to see them as things or objects to be checked off in the order of worship service. It is easy to forget what they essentially are: namely, a way of doing some vital worshiping activity toward God. Eventually these regular elements tended to be called by some technical name—often the first several words—that hid their essential nature as verbal activity and made it easy to think of them as liturgical things or objects. As orders became more scripted, it was those names that were mentioned and remembered in orders of worship, not some essential worshiping activity. Ancient examples would include the prayers of praise and adoration like the (slide 14) *Gloria in Excelsis* or the *Te Deum*. (A modern example would be the Doxology listed in many modern orders of worship.) Many wonderful items were added to the classic Word and Table order over the centuries, but there was a loss of the original feel of Justin’s service. It became easier to think of Word and Table as a sequence of liturgical objects, not as a flow of worshiping actions.

(slide 15, white slide) One other historical development undercut the groove of the earliest Word and Table services: the loss of spontaneous interaction between the worship leaders and congregation. Worship through the first several centuries bore hallmarks of public ritual in an oral culture like the use of call and response and spur-of-the-moment outbursts from the congregation to which a liturgical leader responded. Anyone who has participated in worship involving interactive dimensions like these realizes that having them adds a certain feel to a service. Their loss as the first millennium of Christian history rolled over to the second was another way that Justin’s order of Word and Table became a different kind of worship.

The coming of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century brought a fracturing of Word and Table as the standard order of worship along with a sowing of a wide diversity about how to order worship among Protestants. All this was the result of an amazing anomaly that had developed by the late Middle Ages. Late medieval churches had weekly or daily worship using a Word and Table order in order to consecrate the Eucharist, but actual reception of Communion by the people was infrequent! Protestants uniformly decided there would be no celebration of the Lord’s Supper without reception. With that conviction in hand, Protestants could either increase the frequency of reception or create new, non-Communion (that is, non-Word and Table) orders of worship that highlighted the sermon. Because increasing the frequency proved very difficult to accomplish, the result was creation of a diverse arranement of orders of worship, whether in the sixteenth century or now. New liturgical approaches might have been created with the new Protestant orders, but what was not reclaimed in the major early Protestant liturgical traditions (Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed) was the first centuries’ feel for doing Word and Table.

In additional other early Protestant developments reinforced a trajectory away from the original ancient way found in Justin’s worship. Ironically, one of these was the reintroduction of congregational song (as opposed to a reliance upon choirs to provide all the music). While congregational singing was a wonderful recovery for Protestants and brought its own sense of renewal, the manner in which songs were usually done did not contribute to recovering the ancient feel of worship as a continuous flow of activity. This way most Protestants handled congregational song usually reinforced the notion of doing only one thing at a time, thus eliminating the layering of multiple liturgical actions simultaneously.

Most Protestants also continued to rely upon a written liturgical text, a reliance that increased as the printing press made possible standardized texts more easily produced and distributed. Thus extemporaneity and discernment of time continued to be marginal concerns except for some Protestants not among the major Protestant traditions. (slide 16) The presentation of a printed order of worship with its written-out texts likewise created an assumption about the independence of the objects, that is, acts of worship, listed on the page.

The standard tone of Protestant worship in its major traditions also worked against having the feel of Justin’s worship. Protestant worship, on the whole, has been characterized by being rational (concerned with the mind), verbal (reliant upon words), and instructive (cultivating the knowing of what is being done and why). The later philosophical movement of the eighteenth century called the Enlightenment brought about an emphasis on these qualities. The social advancement of congregations and traditions did, too, since increased education, greater wealth, and higher social position have often led to presumptions about what constitutes “proper” worship. The combined effect of these factors has often been a concern for a way of worship that does not have the same liturgical dynamics of an oral culture like the one we can presume in Justin Martyr’s description. (slide 17) The combined effect is to produce worship like we saw in mid-twentieth century mainline Protestantism, so-called “traditional worship.”

Of course, there have been some Protestant worship traditions (including Pentecostal, Charismatic, non-denominational) that have recovered the elements seen in Justin’s account: an open-endedness of time, extemporaneity, and the order as a flowing sequence of essential activity. But they rarely had these elements when they were worshiping by an order that included the Table. These traditions usually have not been interested in worship history other than what they draw from the New Testament.

Very recent developments, including technological developments, have often reinforced the loss of an ancient groove for mainline Protestant worship. (slide 18) The growing ability for local congregations to print its own order of worship and texts—first through mimeograph machines, then copiers, and now computer printers—can now easily place an order of worship adapted for each service into the hands of all worshipers. Holding such an order draws the eyes downward and makes a worshiper’s body more passive. The manner of presentation on the page tends to reinforce the isolation of individual acts of worship as independent objects while also instilling a sense of orderly, sequential progression through the service, one item at a time.

(slide 19, white slide) The recent shift of worship leadership to laity seated in the pews has brought about another development: gaps of time waiting for the next act of worship. When these lay “liturgists” are seated throughout the space, there is inevitably a gap of time until they walk to the spot (usually marked by another technological development, a microphone) to do their part. The stationary microphone identifies the place where leadership can take place thus isolating the location for leading and also further isolating the items listed in the order of worship as separate acts of worship.

And that is where mainline, “traditional” Protestant worship was by the mid-twentieth century. It had lost the groove it had in the second century and had a different feel to it. It had lost its original open-endedness in time, its extemporaneity, and its order as a smooth flow of actions moving from one action to the next. Unfortunately, when the four-fold order of Word and Table was introduced as a recovery of an ancient way of worship in the last several decades, its advocates did not pick up on these subtle aspects of Justin’s description even though Justin’s description of worship was a main witness to the new, yet ancient, way of worship they advocated. Instead, advocates of the new “ancient worship” picked up the feel of the immediately preceding “traditional” Protestant worship. As you remember what I said yesterday, it was easy to confuse “traditional Protestant worship” and this attempt to recover “ancient worship” because outwardly they looked and felt so similar.

But who says (slide 20) a Word and Table order today cannot be done with the same groove seen in the second century and in contemporary praise and worship services? In my presentation tomorrow, I want to explore how the ethos of praise and worship can provide a way to do Justin Martyr’s way of an ancient order of worship. I want to explore how ancient worship done today can become more contemporary and less traditional.

I look forward to speaking to you on this topic tomorrow. Thank you very much.