

Public Worship that Sings, Preaches and Enacts God's Story
Robert Webber's Final Call

Commending the Call

Before the death of my dear mentor and friend, Robert Webber spent a good portion of his last year working collaboratively with over 300 theologians and other leaders to craft *A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future* (see link below). The *Call* continues some themes from and expands upon the influential and widely circulated "Chicago Call" of 1977, and sets forth a vision for an Ancient-Future faith in a postmodern world.

The theologians and pastors who participated represented a broad diversity of ethnicity and denominational affiliation. The *Call's* listing of theological editors and members of the board of reference is remarkable in its depth, but most encouraging to me is that hundreds of pastors, theologians, and lay persons across the U. S., Canada, and the world are signing the *Call*, lending voice to its concerns and affirming its truths. The *Call* is comprised of six sections, plus a prologue and epilogue, focusing on the gospel narrative in the context of the church: 1. *On the Primacy of the Biblical Narrative*; 2. *On the Church, the Continuation of God's Narrative*; 3. *On the Church's Theological Reflection on God's Narrative*; 4. *On Church's Worship as Telling and Enacting God's Narrative*; 5. *On Spiritual Formation in the Church as Embodiment of God's Narrative*; and 6. *On the Church's Embodied Life in the World*.

That Bob helped to craft such a call is not unusual, for he spent the whole of his professional life calling the church to continual reform and, most especially, encouraging leaders and laity alike to drink from the refreshing well of ancient truth. That the *Call* comes, as it does, at a time of great change in the world and in the church, and that it also comes just before his passing, gives it a kind of weight that, at least for me, makes it especially compelling to examine.

Of course there is monumental change occurring in church and in her worship as we leave the modern era behind and move forward into that unknown thing, so new that we still call it, rather uncreatively, "postmodernity." I think of it as the collision of two great landmasses on a geologic scale: There will be friction, there might be some earthquakes – perhaps even some fire – but in the end, the steady push of the "new" will make its mark and change the landscape forever. The modern, with its emphasis on intellect and word, is slowly but surely being overrun by the postmodern, with its emphasis on experience and story and symbol.

But in many ways the "new" is not that new after all. Many postmodern worshipers, especially the "younger evangelicals" as Bob would identify them, are turning to inspiration to the rich pattern and language of the ancient church. There they are rediscovering classic Christianity and learning to draw strength and spirituality from a deep, satisfying well of time-tested truth and tradition. The postmodern world need not frighten us, for many of its thirsts can be marvelously and even uniquely quenched there.

And that's partly where the *Call* comes in, for it seeks to describe what all of this might look like in our postmodern world. Chief among the aims of the *Call* is to highlight the pressing need for Evangelicals to reflect more deeply on the substance of the biblical narrative, its articulation in the historic faith, and to recover the fullness of that heritage. At Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church, where I serve as Worship Pastor, our staff and worship elders have embraced the *Call* and are especially focused upon how it might inform the very way we go about the design and crafting of worship.

The section of *Call* that more particularly addresses worship is as follows:

4. On Church's Worship as Telling and Enacting God's Narrative

We call for public worship that sings, preaches and enacts God's story. We call for a renewed consideration of how God ministers to us in baptism, Eucharist, confession, the laying on of hands, marriage, healing and through the charisms of the Spirit, for these actions shape our lives and signify the meaning of the world.

Thus, we call Evangelicals to turn away from forms of worship that focus on God as a mere object of the intellect, or that assert the self as the source of worship. Such worship has resulted in lecture-oriented, music-driven, performance-centered and program-controlled models that do not adequately proclaim God's cosmic redemption. Therefore, we call Evangelicals to recover the historic substance of worship of Word and Table and to attend to the Christian year, which marks time according to God's saving acts.

Reflecting on the Call

The depth of what is contained in those few lines is such that it might take the whole of my life to even begin to sort out what it means and what its implications are. I now consider it a primary lens through which I view all of my work and ministry, both in the church and in my teaching. These days I'm developing a workshop that attempts to break down the *Call's* section on worship and help leaders creatively think about how to design and implement some of its elements.

My hope is that you and your church, especially those whose joyful task it is to craft corporate worship, will take some intentional time to reflect on the *Call*. Ask difficult questions: What does worship really look like that "enacts God's story"? How might our worship change, if at all, if we focused on the ministries of worship and their ability to "shape our lives and signify meaning to the world"? And maybe some of the hardest questions of all: Is our worship "lecture-oriented, music-driven, performance-centered and program-controlled"? Have we neglected the Table? If we're not allowing God's mighty deeds and saving acts order and mark our time, then what have we allowed to do so?

The modern world did some damage, though hopefully not lasting, to the church and to her worship. My great hope is that the *Call* will go a long way toward bringing some much needed correctives.

A Final Word

Robert Webber's passing is a great loss to the evangelical world, for there is much work that remains in worship renewal that, in some ways, was uniquely his to do. There was at once a graceful ease and yet also an urgency in the way he went about calling evangelicals back to a biblical theology of worship. His passing is an enormous personal blow to those of us blessed to have sat under his teaching.

I've heard other students talk about Bob's death in terms of losing their "North Star". What a great picture of Bob and his work. For me, though, the metaphor that most hits the mark is the "fixed foot". Do you know the final lines of the poem by John Donne, *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*? The work in its original context speaks of the romantic connection between two loves, yet I marvel over the picture Donne paints of the twin compass and how it applies to my present mourning. A compass is made of two parts— two adjustable legs— with one standing firm and the other circumnavigating around the first. Bob Webber was my "fixed foot", in Donne's parlance— a part of me that, wherever I wandered, would remain firmly planted, rock steady, always there to help make my circle true.

Of course, he would be quick to remind me that all of life, all of our "circles", are rooted and centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ. But then that made Bob refreshingly unique as well: his faithful, constant reminders of where we all fit into the big story.

Part of Bob Webber's legacy, and perhaps one of the most lasting parts, is the *Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future*. Even now the *Call* is winding its way across North America and beyond, gracefully, urgently challenging pastors and leaders to remember that the road to the future runs through the past, that God's story is supreme, that Jesus Christ has triumphed over evil and death, and that one day He's coming again. Maranatha! Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus!

*If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.
And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.
Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;*

*Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.*

John Donne. *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* (lines 25-36).

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Recommended Resources:

Read the *Call* at the Robert E. Webber Center for an Ancient Evangelical Future. Available at: <http://www.aefcall.org/>. Accessed Wednesday, March 17, 2010.

Interview in Christianity Today Magazine with Robert Webber about the *Call*. Available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/10.54.html> Accessed Wednesday, March 17, 2010.

The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies. Available at: <http://www.IWSFla.org>. Accessed Wednesday, March 17, 2010.

John Donne: *A Valediction Forbidden Mourning* (the complete poem). Available at: <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/mourning.php>. Accessed Wednesday, March 17, 2010.

www.Epiclesis.org