

The Road to the Future Runs through the Past: How Worship Communicates and is Formed by the Biblical Narrative and the Great Tradition

Dr. James R. Hart, President

The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

Robert Webber wrote, “Worship does God’s story.” What does that mean, and why does it matter? If it does matter, how has God’s story formed the worship of God’s people over the past two thousand years? More to it, how has that worship formed God’s people into Christ-followers being “poured out for the life of the world?”

Just as the historic creeds of the Church are biblical and theological summaries of what we have always believed as Christians, so worship is a biblical and theological summary of how God’s people are, and have always been, spiritually formed by God’s Word, enlivened, renewed and nourished by God’s presence and sent into the world on God’s mission. Worship is the Gospel proclaimed and embodied. The entire biblical narrative is summarized in the Gospel, which is the essential content of Christian worship. The Church father Athanasius defined the Gospel in this way, “The Son of God became the Son of Man, so the sons and daughters of men could become the sons and daughters of God.” This biblical definition of the Gospel is consistent with the unanimous witness of the Church fathers, that in Christ all of humanity has been taken up into the divine life of God. In fact, according to St. Paul, all of creation itself has been reconciled to God through Christ (2 Cor 5:19, Eph 1:9, 10 (recapitulation); Col 1:20). We do not become the “I AM,” or the *ipsum esse subsistens*, “the subsistent act of ‘to be’ itself,” as St. Thomas Aquinas referred to God. But we can become *like* him, transformed into his likeness revealed in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.



The entirety of Christian worship and liturgy should be rooted in this Gospel. Bob Webber defined the gospel generally as God’s story of reconciliation of the entire created order through the work of Jesus Christ, his only Son. Webber’s definition of the gospel, informed by his study of the Church fathers, related to the “divinely authorized canonical story of the Triune God. This story—Creation, Incarnation, and Re-creation—was effected by Christ’s recapitulation of human history and summarized by the early Church in its Rules of Faith.”¹

Back to my earlier question: how has God’s story formed God’s people? Here is a true, biblical and spiritual principle. Spiritual formation takes place only in the womb of the Church. And, worship is famously the source and summit of the spiritual life of the Church.

¹ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 180.

Therefore, God's people are formed most profoundly in worship emanating from the community of Mother Church.

Third century bishop and martyr St. Cyprian of Carthage wrote, "He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother."

The Church

Let us explore spiritual formation in the church's worship life. First, the Church. In Matt 16:15-20, when Jesus asked his disciples "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

In the past years, I have reviewed worship curricula in various Christian higher education institutions, and I have noticed in some schools a lack of coursework in the historical development of Christian worship. I suspect there may be revealed here an individualistic, sectarian, even separatist ecclesiology. I suspect there may be a privileging of biblical theological study *that is divorced from history* either through at best a disinterest or neglect, or at worst a distrust or a blatant disregard of the authority of the 2000 year history and wisdom of the Church. I suspect that in the biblical and theological study of worship in some schools, there is quite possibly a hubristic approach to scriptural interpretation that is decidedly and determinedly a-historical and perhaps even anti-historical. NOTE: *The Bible is not a self-interpreting document*; it opens up all kinds of dilemmas, all kinds of questions. So, *it must be interpreted through the historic and authoritative witness of the Apostles and their spiritual ancestors in the Church*. Individual interpretation apart from the Great Tradition fractures the Body of Christ!

In our convocational services we recite the Nicene Creed. Christians have embraced and professed this comprehensive summary of the Christian faith since the First Council of Nicaea in 325. In this creed, we say four "We believes":

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,*

But then we say,

We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

It may seem blasphemous to include an "institution" in the same faith statement with the Triune God. We believe in the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit—and the Church? We believe in the three persons of the eternal Godhead—and an organization?

But the Church is not a human institution or organization. It isn't a club one joins. It isn't a random assemblage of folks with common beliefs, like the Abe Lincoln Society or the Rotary Club. It is rather an interdependent organism, a living thing, a great gathering force,

a communion of love. It is called by God, instituted by Jesus Christ himself and constituted by the Holy Spirit. It shares in the very life and being of Christ as his mystical Body.

The cornerstone of the theology of the Church (ecclesiology) is this: The Church is the ongoing incarnation of Christ in the world—the very sacrament of Christ, his “mystical” body. Mystical means sacramental or transcending understanding, but it does NOT mean hidden or invisible.

In the passage above from Matthew 16, Peter makes the first apostolic declaration: “You are the Christ, the son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). This is the very foundation and definition of the Christian faith. Jesus declares that Peter is blessed, not because he proclaimed this of his own intellect or emotion, not out of his human mind, and not because he parroted someone else’s conviction. He made this proclamation as prompted by “the Father in heaven,” and certainly by the Holy Spirit as well. Peter was a willing instrument of the Father. And upon him and the truth of this declaration the church is built. Note: the church’s foundation is not simply a person, nor simply a theological apostolic truth, but both together, and both affirmed by Jesus Christ himself. The Church is in truth the ongoing incarnation of Christ to the world, the very sacrament of Christ, the mystical Body of Christ. And therefore, she has the authority of Christ.

St. Augustine wrote, “Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God’s grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members; he and we together are the whole man. . . . The fullness of Christ then is the head and the members. But what does ‘head and members’ mean? Christ and the Church.”²

St. Gregory the Great stated, “Our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy Church whom he has taken to himself.”³

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person.”⁴

In Eph 5:31-32 we find these words from St. Paul: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to **Christ and the Church**. In Col 1:18 he wrote: “He is the head of the body, the Church.” In 1 Tim 3:15, Paul refers to the Church of the living God as “the pillar and bulwark of truth.”

At the trial before her martyrdom, St. Joan of Arc said: “About Jesus Christ and the Church, I know this: they are simply one thing, and we shouldn’t complicate the matter.”⁵ That is profound.

² St. Augustine, *In evangelium Johannis tractatus*, 21, 8: PL 35, 1658.

³ St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job, praef.*, 14: PL 75, 525A.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, 48, 2.

⁵ Acts of the Trial of Joan of Arc, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 795.

Let us examine the four descriptors of the Church from the creed:

One: As you probably know, the *Shema* is the centerpiece of Jewish morning and evening prayer: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one (Dt 6:4). *Shema* is reflected in the first line of the creed: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty." These proclamations disempower all other claims to deity—no other claimant is God. The Church assimilates all that is good and beautiful and true and right in the cosmos and brings them under the aegis of the one God. The Church is one.

Holy: The Church is set apart, although not perfect. However, as the mystical Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Church bears Christ's holiness to the world through the Holy Spirit. The grace of God manifested in and through the Church's ministry makes it holy. The Church is holy.

Catholic: Catholic means "universal," or literally, "according to the whole." Through the Church God gathers the world to himself—embracing but transcending nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. The Church is called out from the oppressive regimes of the powers of darkness and declared to be, universally, "What belongs to the Lord." Isn't that beautiful? The Church is catholic.

Apostolic: This means "Rooted in the Apostles," those who stayed with Jesus. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53). After that, many disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. Jesus said to the Twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter then said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." These are the apostles who remained with Jesus even when the following got tough.

But it's not just a 2000 year-old apostolicity. The Apostolic Tradition is living and active, established by the Lord Jesus, formed by the faith of the Apostles and sustained by their successors, the ordained, the living authority of the Church. As John Henry Newman indicated, the Apostolic faith is not passed on like a dumb object. Rather it unfolds like a river that deepens and broadens in time, or grows like a great oak tree that emerges from an acorn. The river doesn't reject its source nor the tree its roots, but allows them to grow and deepen, just like the life of God engulfing the cosmos. It is a living and growing apostolicity!

The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This is revealed in the first Core Value of IWS: "IWS is evangelical in nature and ecumenical in outlook, embracing and serving the whole church in its many expressions and variations of the Christian faith, particularly articulated by the consensus of the ancient Church and its guardians in the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, the Protestant Reformation and the Evangelical awakenings and heritage."

Robert Webber was a patristics scholar and historical theologian who was committed not only to the authority of scripture, but the authority of the Church, holding these two authorities in the highest, but co-equal, respect. This is revealed in many parts of the [Ancient Evangelical Future Call](#), a project that he convened in 2006. Here is one slightly paraphrased excerpt from what he and the other authors of the Call wrote concerning the authority of the Great Tradition resident in the Church: "We call [Christians] to turn away

from methods that separate theological reflection from the common traditions of the Church. . . . Therefore, we call [Christians] to unity in "the tradition that has been believed everywhere, always and by all."⁶ I commend that document to you for your study, scrutiny, and endorsement.

The Bible is famously referred to as the "soul of theology." I believe that it is impossible to overstate the importance of embracing the absolute authority of the Bible as it is interpreted through the historic and living authority of the historic and living Church of Jesus Christ. Again, the Bible is not a self-interpreting document; rather it must be interpreted through the historic and authoritative witness of the Apostles and their spiritual ancestors in the Church.

We have the great privilege of calling the world to right worship, to the right ordering of human life, to ortho-doxy. Well-ordered worship, rooted in scripture and the Church, tells the world its true story. Right worship orders our lives to Christ; it orders our families, our churches, our cities, our cultures, yes, even the entire cosmos to Christ.

Spiritual Formation

This brings us to spiritual formation. In his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Joseph Ratzinger writes, "Prayer, the self-opening of the human spirit to God, is true worship. The more man becomes "word"—or rather: the more his whole existence is directed toward God—the more he accomplishes true worship."⁷ He goes on to say, "True worship is the living human being, who has become a total answer to God, shaped by God's healing and transforming word." He says that the ministries of word and sacrament, *found in the Church*, "transform people into an offering to God and make the cosmos into praise and thanksgiving to the Creator and Redeemer."⁸ Let me ask you what I ask myself: Are you allowing yourselves to "become word, with your whole existence directed toward God?" Are you being shaped daily by "God's healing and transforming word?" Are you leading others to be "transformed into an offering to God, making the cosmos into praise and thanksgiving to the Creator and Redeemer?" If so, may God sustain you in that. If not, may God place that in your heart. Right worship, true worship, forms us into Christ-likeness and calls us and empowers us to mission by the Holy Spirit. As we are spiritually formed in worship, we "must decrease" and God "must increase," as John the Baptist stated in John 3:30.

The great 14th-century saint, mystic and doctor of the Church, St. Catherine of Siena, received this word from the Father: "Do you know, daughter, who you are and who I am? If you know these two things you will have beatitude within your grasp. You are she who is not, and I AM HE WHO IS."⁹ Don't read those words to mean nonexistence. Rather, read it through the lens of John 3:30.

⁶ Robert E. Webber, <http://webbercenter.tsm.edu/about-us/aef-call/>

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week, From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 238.

⁸ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

⁹ Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1980), 85.

Something so important happens in a life committed to continuous worship and prayer (like St. Catherine), rooted in the God's Word and God's Church that it seems the worshiper and even the whole of creation is saturated and transfigured by the Divine life. We decrease (joyfully) and He increases (in joy as well). That is how we ought to live each day; that is how worship rooted in the Bible and in the Church can powerfully form us and our fellow pilgrims for mission.

We are called to lead worship that is shaped by Scripture. But we are called as well to lead worship that is formed by the wisdom and Divine life of the Great Tradition of the Church. This wisdom and life of the Church reveals and embraces the apostolic faith, and bears the holiness, righteousness and transforming power of Christ to the entire created order. In a very real, concrete and practical way, this Good News of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in the presentation and preaching of the Word, it is embodied in the celebration of the Table and the various expressions of worship arts, and it is sent out on mission as God's people go into all the world. We, the Church, participate with Christ in the power of Holy Spirit in transfiguring creation and calling it forth into the New Eden of God, the Heavenly Jerusalem, the eschatological purpose of the Church, both now, in this age, and in the age to come. That is God's great story—His reconciliation of the entire created order back to himself (2 Cor 5:17-19)—and his summon for us to join him in that acrobatic act of reconciliation, being poured out for the very life of the world. God help us to be faithful to that call.

“He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother.”
“You are he and she who are not, and I AM HE WHO IS.”

Thanks be to God.

© 2017 by The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies

The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies
Forming servant leaders in worship renewal
4001 Hendricks Avenue, Jacksonville, FL 32207
+1 (904) 264-2172