

THE TAPESTRY OF HISTORIC CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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The worship of the Living God, as it has been revealed in historic Christian faith, has come down to us through the root system of the tradition of ancient Israel. It has been embodied in the revelation of God in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and has been hammered out on the anvil of the experience of God's worshipping people through history. The fullness, beauty, and power of orthodox Christian faith and worship has stood the test of heretics and false brethren, of persecution and martyrdom, of major socio-political shifts at the change-over of key historical eras, as well as the subtle dangers of acceptability, prosperity and prestige in certain times and places.

The worship of God in Jesus Christ has come down to us in our modern era as a tapestry shredded and fragmented by the sins of God's people in breaking the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace given us originally as our heritage in Christ, the Incarnate Lord. That which began as a beautiful whole, a tapestry of many colors and varied threads which, together, revealed the fullness of Christ in the midst of His Church, has been torn and rent apart as men in their self-centered preoccupations for power, in their pride and arrogance and lack of love and humility have gradually separated that which God gave to the Church as a complete and comprehensive experience.

In the contemporary spiritual renewal that many today are calling the "convergence movement", or "convergence of streams", I believe we are beginning to see a significant attempt by the Spirit of God to restore the intrinsic wholeness and fullness of Christian worship. God the Holy Spirit seems to be restoring, reweaving the separated threads of the tapestry so that once again God's people may rejoice in Him with the gladness that only the blending or convergence of separated, isolated streams can offer the Church, and through the Church, may be offered to the world.

The three foundational elements of historic, biblical worship that began as a part of the comprehensive tapestry of the spiritual experience of the early Church were what might be described in today's terms as evangelical, charismatic, and liturgical/sacramental - or Word, Spirit and Sacrament. These three aspects of the spiritual life and worship of the Christians of the early centuries were inherited from their roots in the worship of ancient Israel. The evangelical element emerged from Israel's emphasis on the inspired written law of the Lord and its' faithful and regular exposition and public reading by the teaching priests appointed by God to lead His people in their worship. The Law of the Lord, the contents of His covenant with His people and the foundational element in their ability to worship Him according to revelation and truth, was central to the worship of the Hebrew people. This aspect of their worship transcended every phase of Israel's experience with Yahweh, from mountain epiphany to desert tabernacle, and from temple grandeur to synagogue simplicity.

The second integrating element that formed the whole of Israel's worship relationship with the Living God was the charismatic (some would use terms such as prophetic, ecstatic, miraculous, or inspired). As understood biblically and in light of contemporary charismatic renewal, this element was represented in the prophetic aspect of Israel's life as the people of God and provided a vital link in calling Israel to a continual return to their faithful, first-love relationship with Yahweh. This element not only introduced the miraculous and immediate experience of God's power and manifest presence, but also acted as the direct and supernatural encounter of God's people with Himself that led them to regular experiences of repentance, spiritual renewal as a nation, and restoration to the vitality of covenant relationship with Him. The charismatic can most readily be identified in Israel's worship through a variety of expressions, such as inspired songs, psalms and odes; joyful and enthusiastic dancing and celebration at certain feasts; visions, dreams, and prophetic utterances, as well as miraculous works of power.

The third thread of our tapestry, as it began in ancient Israel's worship, is that of the liturgical and sacramental. Liturgy may simply be defined as the offering of public, corporate worship by the people to Yahweh by means of certain fixed and repeated rites and ceremonies, prayers and offerings, having their roots in the commandments and precepts of God given to them as His priestly people. This aspect of worship began at the mountain of Horeb and continued in the tabernacle experience, developed further in the temple, and was preserved in spirit in the synagogue. The sacramental reality was experienced in God's use of physical and symbolic signs and instruments through which He conveyed His power, Presence, and sustaining enablement, which we call grace. Means such as the snake wrapped around the pole for healing in the desert, the dead man springing to life again merely by coming in contact with the bones of the long dead prophet Elisha; the divine deliverance experienced by the eating of the Passover lamb; water from the rock, etc. – all these experiences were sacramental; that is, God used outward and visible means by which to convey inward and spiritual grace, power, and life to those who received. The liturgical and sacramental threads acted as God-given means in Hebrew worship through which the awe, wonder, and mystery of God's personal and corporate interaction with them was preserved, constantly recalled, and passed on as heritage.

The early Christians, the majority of whom were Hebrews, initially, were steeped in this worship tradition and in the vital interaction of these three threads that made up the life-giving tapestry of their encounter with God. This tradition emerged empowered, filled out, and reinterpreted by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ from the day of Pentecost, on. So, the worship of the early Church, yes, even from apostolic times, was at the same time evangelical, charismatic, and liturgical/sacramental. There was no vying of one element against the other, or of one pretending to be more spiritually superior and vital than the other. They formed a whole in the early Church's response of love, adoration, prayer, and faith to the reality of the life of the Risen Christ in their midst. It was left to the actions and reactions of individuals and groups within the life of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, over time, to begin unraveling the threads of the tapestry, and, finally, separating them as though they had always been opposed to one another.

Sovereignly, in our day, our mighty God seems to be weaving together these three threads or streams to again give to the Church, and through the Church to the

world, the full beauty and power of the tapestry, which reveals the fullness, beauty, and glory of the Church's Lord and the world's Savior. Whether it be in the formation of new communions of historic, apostolic, and catholic faith and worship that combine these three streams, or in the implementation of the influences and heritage of all three in already existing communions and congregations, this "convergence of streams" is contributing a growing impact towards reshaping the face and expression of Christianity in our time. There are hopeful signs of a new impetus towards unity and reunion, albeit, at a very grassroots level, as a new sense of Holy Spirit-given ecumenism seems to be spreading as one of the fruits of this fresh movement of renewal. Separate traditions of the Lord's Church, which in isolation represent one or the other of these three threads, seem to be finding one another on a journey of enriching spiritual discovery of one another's worship traditions, thus providing a more complete picture and experience of what God has given to His people in Christ through history.

Who knows, but in our day – today – the Church universal may be poised on the brink of rediscovery of its' ancient roots, a rediscovery of the treasure of the fullness of its' heritage that may lead us again to a deepening experience of the biblical axiom:

“Though one alone may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Ecc. 4:12.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit
MAY THE TAPESTRY BE RESTORED WHOLE AGAIN, TO THE GLORY OF GOD!

AMEN!

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