Chapter 1

The Things of the Spirit

The trouble with loving the things of the Spirit, as Robert C. Roberts once wrote, is that "the Holy Spirit isn't the only spirit around." The Holy Spirit is in competition with a lot of other spirits, and some of them look as if *they* come from God too. They look as if they might be life-giving spirits. They feel as if they might be comforting spirits. The spirit of personal ambition, for example, can look like holy zeal. The spirit of aesthetic pleasure can feel like adoration of God. The spirit of envy can sound like the hunger for social justice. What's more, these spirits show up not only on TV but also in church, where they compete with God for our loyalty. When we embrace them instead of God we commit idolatry, but perhaps unconsciously, given their omnipresence. In any case, what we clearly need is a particular gift of the Holy Spirit, namely, the ability to *discern* spirits — to identify them, to tell them apart, and to disentangle them from the Spirit of God.[1]

At no time do we need this ability more urgently than when we think about the changes that have come upon Christian worship in North America within the last twenty-five years, and especially the

1. Robert C. Roberts, *The Strengths of a Christian* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), p. 19.

The Ridiculous Incongruity of Worship
Justo L. González

On the nature of Christian worship, perhaps we ought to begin by stating that the acceptance of worship is always an act of God's grace. There is no worship, no music, no prayer, no sermon, in itself so good that God has to accept it. Just as we are sinners whose life God redeems by grace, we are all mumbling stutterers whose words and music God accepts by grace. Just as we cannot attain heaven by a ladder of good works, so can we not attain God's ear by a scale of beautiful notes.

By its very nature worship, no matter how aesthetically pleasing, is ridiculously incongruous. To think that we can really offer praise so worthy that God would accept it on its own merit is the height of folly. This judgment of ridiculous incongruity must be equally applied to all worship, from the most elemental to the most sophisticated. We cannot overcome it with the well-modulated motifs of a Bach fugue, and we cannot overcome it with the most sincerely felt and most exuberantly expressed joy of contemporary "praise" songs.

This is true not only of the style of worship but also of its content. What this means is that theology *(for worship ought to be theologically sound)* must be very clear that its task is not to make worship acceptable to God. Just as Christian ethics does not seek to make our actions acceptable to God, so theology should not seek to make our worship acceptable to God. That is best left up to God's grace. In worship we not only celebrate God's graceful acceptance of ourselves; we also offer unacceptable gifts, trusting that the same grace that has accepted us will accept them.

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package of changes often called "Contemporary Worship" (a term we capitalize to distinguish it from present-day worship, only some of which would be classified as "Contemporary"). Here is a movement that some praise as revival and others condemn as apostasy. From San Diego, California, to Bangor, Maine, the movement has renewed some congregations and troubled or even split others. In fact, it has changed the way lots of Christians identify themselves — no longer first as "Methodist" or "Presbyterian," no longer first as "liberal" or "evangelical" or "fundamental." Nowadays, just as some generations of Americans identify themselves according to the kind of music they listen to, so a number of Christians think of themselves primarily in terms of their style of worship. They attend "Contemporary Worship" or else "traditional worship," and they may make their choice with a good deal of passion. Or they may

elect one of the forms of "blended worship" that combine classic hymns, contemporary Christian ballads, and popular gospel choruses, and feel that this choice, too, represents the compromise or settlement of a spirited debate.

To its advocates, Contemporary Worship represents the fresh breeze of the Spirit of God blowing through the church. These Christians have chafed at worship that seems to them stale. Organ preludes, sedate preachments, contrived silences, formulaic responses, peculiar hymn texts — these and other features of so-called traditional worship have left them feeling "sore oppressed," to quote one of the hymns they would like to escape. They wonder, How did the worship of God get to be so *boring?* Why shouldn't we worship in the ways that we actually talk and sing? Why shouldn't we worship in a way that has a chance of connecting with seekers — including the seekers within our own families?

When given the opportunity to worship God in their popular idiom, the advocates of Contemporary Worship think as our ancestors did when they were handed a Bible translated into their own language: "At last! At last we are liberated to encounter God in our natural voice!"

"[W]orship is going on all the time in heaven, and when we worship we are joining that which is already happening. . . ."

John Wimber, "Worship: Intimacy with God," http://www.vineyardboise.org/specialized_ministries/worship/wimber_worship.htm (1 August 2003)

But to more classically minded Christians, Contemporary Worship represents the blowing not of the Spirit of God but of the spirit of the age. When they attend their church's worship on Sunday morning and discover that their minister now acts like an emcee, or that the sanctuary has been darkened in order to spotlight a "Christian performing artist," these Christians believe that their church has sold its soul. Worship seems less like the company of saints and martyrs than like a nightclub that forgot to close. So they wonder, Why outfit the gospel in an ethos that clashes with it? Why stand for worldly entertainment, rather than against it? Why can't believers worship God without trying simultaneously to amuse a TV-sated audience?

When given a chance to worship in a so-called "traditional" idiom, the opponents of Contemporary Worship think as our forebears did when they were handed a Bible translated into their own language: "At last! At last we have the prophets and apostles, who liberate us to encounter God aside from the tyranny of contemporary fashion!"

Present-day worship practices have stimulated a good deal of argument among Christians, and rightly so. On the whole, worship *deserves* a good argument, since (as we noted in the introduction) worship stands right at the intersection of the church and the world, or of "Christ and culture." In worship, as in all else, Christians want to know how to celebrate the gospel in such a way as to show its attraction, but also in such a way that it's still the gospel that gets celebrated, and not some cheaper grace of our own. And so we argue, and, regrettably, sometimes even quarrel: Can the gospel be conveyed today with habits and tunes that are more than three hundred years old, or only with JumboTron screens and PowerPoint presentations?

"[W]e worship in the Spirit, and as we do so we are taking our place amongst the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. . . . Heaven is not a long way away."

N. T. Wright, "Freedom and Framework, Spirit and Truth: Rediscovering Biblical Worship," *The January Series,* Calvin College (11 January 2002)

This intersection between "the church and the world" or "Christ and culture" is one where Christians have debated before, and the debate has never ceased. It has simply been passed down, one generation to the next, for as long as the Christian church has existed. Whenever Christians have sought to preach, teach, worship, or witness in forms adapted from their immediate, local culture, their brothers and sisters in Christ have wondered whether the church should be more circumspect. To ally with culture to serve the purposes of grace is to take the risk of corrupting the gospel — which (as we shall explore later) is something like the risk of the incarnation itself.

In any case, disagreements arise, often sharp ones.

We should take note that many contemporary disputes, such as those on university campuses, flare among people whose contrary

loyalties give them scant hope of resolving their dispute, or even of setting its tone. The reason is that the disputants are skeptical of the human quest for truth and of the role of honest argument in support of this quest. Moreover, apart from their common skepticism, they may also be committed to opposing philosophies of life, or, as it is often put these days, to "different core values." In fact, given their joint skepticism and root opposition, both parties may acknowledge up front that agreement is beyond their reach, that serious debate is a doubtful or even pointless exercise, and that the only plausible outcome of a tussle between them is that one will out-shout or out-maneuver the other.

"Eternal, incomprehensible, and invisible God, infinite in power, wisdom and goodness; dwelling in the light which no man can approach, where thousand thousands minister unto thee, and ten thousand times ten thousand stand before thee. . . . We come to thee at thy call and worship at thy footstool."

Richard Baxter, The Savoy Liturgy 1661, in *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 385

Here Christians enjoy some of the glorious liberty of the children of God: they may hope for serious discussion leading toward convergence, and perhaps even a degree of consensus. After all, given their doctrines of God and creation, Christians think there is such a thing as reality, "the way things are," and such a thing as truth, a reliable account of reality. Christians also think that by disciplined study of God's revelation we can gain wisdom, especially if we help correct each other's prejudices and self-deceptions with serious discussion.

Part of the truth that Christians jointly confess is a whole cluster of powerfully unifying realities. We believe in one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). We confess one holy catholic church, across the world and across time, and we are conscious of worshiping in the company of its saints and martyrs. We tell the same story of redemption and jointly hope for its everlasting denouement. Moreover, Christians share a general view of the world and of our calling in it, namely, that the world has been created and redeemed by God, through Jesus Christ, and that those in union with Christ should

"live for the praise of his glory" by "seeking first the kingdom of God" (Eph. 1:12; cf. Matt. 6:33).

How might this vocation be pursued?

Even at a general level, Christians answer this question in several ways, but one venerable answer is that in response to God's grace we ought to lead lives distinguished by certain features of godliness or piety. We ought to make good works our "way of life" (Eph. 2:10) and good attitudes our "central business," as Jonathan Edwards put it. On this view a Christian's vocation largely consists in acquiring those "religious affections" or "holy practices" that fit people who belong to Jesus Christ.

"For You are praised by the angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities, powers, and the many-eyed Cherubim. Round about You stand the Seraphim. . . . Together with these blessed powers, loving Master, we sinners also cry out and say: Truly you are holy. . . ."

The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil, trans. by Members of the Faculty of Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988), pp. 24-25

To sketch such a life and its practices, the New Testament offers sections of "parenesis," or instructions for godly living.[2] These are glad invitations and exhortations for people who would follow Jesus. "Let your light shine." "Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good." "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable . . . if there is any excellence . . . think about these things." "Pursue righteousness." "Remind them to be gentle." "Bear with one another." "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, and humility. Above all, clothe yourselves with love." "Be imitators of God." "Strive first for the kingdom." "Restore transgressors in a spirit of gentleness." "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Toward the end of one particularly lovely burst of such hortatives, the apostle Paul turns directly to the topic that concerns us in this book, namely, how to find the confluence of wisdom and love as we help each other worship God:

2. E.g., Rom. 12:1-2, 9-21; Eph. 4:20–5:2; Phil. 2:1-4; Col. 3; 1 Thess. 5:12-22.

> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:15-17)

All this encouragement is for those who have been "raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1), and whose faith therefore rests not only in the person of Christ but also in his program of service and in the virtues that drive it. The person who trusts Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, therefore trusts (contrary to appearances and to Nietzsche) that kindness is a form of strength, and humility a species of wisdom. She trusts that obedience to God exalts a life instead of stifling it, and that a glad habit of listening to others, and lifting up their interests, can excite in a godly community a near-carnival of goodwill and self-irony.

"The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), p. 31

In fact, the point of these guides for holy living is not first to tidy things up in our moral innards, desirable as such tidying may be, but to enable a whole community to thrive. A community with "peace in its heart" has room there as well for the Christ who gave it, and for the neighbor who needs it. In a peaceable kingdom we can know some of the songs of the heart, and can sing them with common enthusiasm for Jesus Christ and for his project in the world.

Because of devotion to our common Lord, we may rejoice not only in our own salvation but also in the salvation of neighbors — who might express their worship, prayer, or joy in a way we wouldn't choose. A community of such peace allows us to teach each other, and even to "admonish" one another, secure in the faith that our teaching and admonition happen "in Christ," which means

inside a cradle of grace. In such an environment, straight talk will be tempered by grace, and grace will retain its core of truth. Given our common goal of making God's heart glad, of thickening union with Christ, and of taking on nourishment for the cause of serving justice and pursuing peace in the world, we needn't nick each other's egos or threaten each other's partisan loyalties.

All this can sound utopian, but the amount of space devoted to prescribing it, or something like it, in these instructional sections of the New Testament tells us that Paul thought it was a normal goal of Christian life. Paul looks at factions, fighting, resentment, name-calling, belittling, and all the other features of church strife and says, simply, "Put it away." Put it to death. Don't *be* that way. Instead, forbear with each other, forgive one another, tell each other the truth in love, and, whatever you do — especially in the midst of your singing — give thanks to God in the name of Jesus Christ.

"The habit of taking each other before God in prayer, familiarly and by name, is eminently beneficial. It will cleanse you. It will sweeten your disposition. It will take away from you every particle of the raven, that loves to feed on carrion."

Henry Ward Beecher, from *Morning and Evening Exercises*

This will take small, medium, and large virtues in anyone who aspires to be even "a pretty good person," as Lewis Smedes describes her. To begin with, we'll need humility, one of the most underestimated virtues in the world. Yet all humility really requires is for one to be well-oriented to reality, which means remaining teachable, because no one person could possibly "know it all," and also remaining reachable, because no one in the church should presume to be the stoic, heroic Lone Ranger.

We'll need candor, or verbal straightforwardness. This, in fact, is a type of justice because it precludes hidden agendas and cloaked daggers. The point is to face each other squarely so we know where the other stands, because only then can we deal with each other at the level of real concerns.

We'll need hospitality, the gracious readiness to make room for others and their interests. This does not mean that we simply relin-

quish our own identity, but rather that we look for ways in which our identity is actually enriched by accepting, welcoming, and entertaining that of others. Self-assured hospitality means we'll be open-minded (but not so open-minded that our brains fall out, as Ann Landers once quipped).

We'll need forbearance: the willingness to put up with people who make us crazy. Sometimes this means tolerating others' interests, which has nothing to do with fostering a blandly neutral outlook. Instead it has to do with putting up with something you don't want for the sake of something bigger that you do want.[3]

"Over all these things," of course, we'll need to "put on love" (cf. Col. 3:14), which is a many-splendored garment, but which for present purposes may be defined as simple goodwill toward our neighbor, a desire to see her flourish as God intended.

When the apostle Paul writes of these things in his letters, he writes to churches that are divided or that are in danger of division, and he calls their members to renew the image of God by such means as telling the truth, putting away their anger after a time, working hard *in order* to have something to give to those who have less, and adopting a tenderhearted attitude toward sinners. The idea is that to do these things is to be like God. To act like this is to act like God. More specifically, to act like this is to represent Jesus Christ, the preeminent image of God the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). We image God by imaging Christ, and we image Christ by showing godly knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Candor, hospitality, and forbearance are just ways of spelling out righteousness. Accordingly, for an ordinary Christian in an ordinary Christian community it should be an awesome thing to consider that

> *"Hope is a projection of the imagination;*
> *so is despair.*
> *Despair all too readily embraces*
> *the ills it foresees;*
> *hope is an energy and arouses the mind*
> *to every possibility to combat*
> *them. . . ."*
>
> Thornton Wilder, cited by Eugene Peterson in *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 132

3. J. Budziszewski, *True Tolerance: Liberalism and the Necessity of Judgment* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1992), p. 7.

every time she struggles to deal patiently with a way of worshiping that seems to her boring, or obnoxious, she is imaging God. She is both expressing and strengthening her union with Christ.

Considerations of this kind help us to see the "holy living" sections of Scripture in the same way as we see the church, namely, as a part of the gospel and not as a mere addendum to it. The reason is that these sections present us with the counsels of grace by the God of grace who knows how life flourishes in union with Christ and wishes to share the recipe. God's commands orient us to covenant living and tell us how to make it sing. It is part of Karl Barth's enduring spiritual genius to see this truth and to insist upon it. God's command is "the form of the gospel" that invites "joyful participation" in good life with God and each other. God's call to compassion, for example, is itself compassionate. When we refuse God's commands, it's grace we are refusing. It's freedom we are refusing. We think we are refusing a bad death, but we are actually refusing the good death that leads to resurrection and life.[4] "The good command of God," writes Otto Weber, comes to us not out of pique, and not out of the blue, but "in Christ," "in the Lord Jesus," "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," "by the mercies of God." From Barth and Weber's writing we might come to a healthy conclusion: forget about "principles," "duties," and even "virtues," if you must, and let your Christian ethics amount to "thought-out parenetics" in which indicative mercy gets transformed into imperative mercy[5] — and not the least in the area of worship, where rancor appears not only divisive but also absurd.

With respect to worship, it is time (once more) to try to move the discussion forward. In fact, it's high noon. The reason is that troubled churches can't pursue their mission in the world very well. Rancor saps a church's energy and distracts its attention from God.

So the main project in this book is to set a context and recom-

4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), pp. 579, 581.

5. Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics,* vol. 2, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 342, 402, 406.

mend a tone in which healthy decisions about worship may be conducted. Though we think the church always needs prophets, we will not offer a simple jeremiad against Contemporary Worship. After all, it has new strengths and vitalities, and we need them. But neither will we accept uncritically every novelty that churches try in their attempt to be modern, relevant, with-it. What we hope instead is to offer help in making discerning choices about worship in an era of remarkable change in North America and beyond.

We begin in Chapter Two with a travelogue of sorts, a survey of worship practices in North America, looking especially at the Contemporary Worship scene, but not exclusively so. Easily asked questions defy easy answers. This is no less true of the question "What is Contemporary Worship?" than of "Who is God?" So we've deliberately attempted to "complexify" the answer to that first question, not least in order to widen our view of the Christian church today.

"Complexifying" is a tactic we take up in the third chapter, too, where we raise questions about Christ and culture with respect to worship. What does it mean to be *in* the world though not *of* it, and how should we make that plain in the way we worship? Here again, we cannot pretend that there are easy answers to every question and every situation. But even if there are no easy answers, this doesn't mean there are *no* answers. That, too, would be pretense. We are left to wrestle for the truth and often against our inclinations.

But this struggle, as we'll see, isn't something we take up in isolation, either as individual church leaders or as independent congregations. The struggle is communal, the effort of a body, made up of many members but submitted to a single head. So in Chapter Four we examine this body, its diversity and its unity. We explore our fellowship as believers, discovering along the way that it is the divine fellowship of the Trinity that makes sense of our oneness even as it invites us to embrace our many-ness.

In Chapter Five we look for how this is so in the church while it worships. Questions that come to the fore in this chapter include the very nature of worship, the drama it enacts, and the hope that it manifests.