

*Worship for the  
Whole People of God*

Vital Worship for the 21st Century

Ruth C. Duck

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## *Introduction*

From the very beginning, Christian worship has been diverse. Over the centuries, Christians have worshiped God through their local cultural expressions, among them language, music, architecture, art, and the more subtle but important expressions that Anscar Chupungco, the groundbreaking scholar of liturgical enculturation, calls “the genius of a people.”<sup>1</sup> At times, Christian worship has created distance from culture (for example, by using a language the people don’t speak daily); at times, Christian worship may almost collapse into culture (for example, by emphasizing secular holidays more than Christ-centered celebrations). Still, if only through using subtly acculturated rhythms to sing a song, worship always reflects the local culture.

Worship also reflects denominational and historical differences. Take the sacrament of the Table, for example. While some denominations celebrate Communion each Sunday, others celebrate once a month, once a quarter, or even once a year. In addition, Christian understandings of how Christ is present in the meal differ. Even the names we use are diverse: Eucharist, Holy Communion, Lord’s Supper, Divine Liturgy, the Mass. At times, where there is local freedom, there may be more diversity *within* a denomination than there are distinct differences *between* denominations.

We need not lament these differences, but rather we can appreciate how Christians have continued to worship in ways that help them to live faithfully within their cultural contexts and to communicate the gospel to others. We can, indeed, celebrate the way the gospel has been preached, sung, and prayed in as many tongues and rhythms as there are peoples around the world, calling forth a rich array of gifts to bring to God and to the world.

The goal in this volume is not to advise a single pattern of worship but to support good pastoral and congregational reflection on worship. No doubt my biases will be more evident to readers than to myself; nor would I argue that all liturgical practices are equally good. My hope is to give lay and clergy leaders enough basic historical, theological,

and pastoral material—and enough good questions—to reflect on and renew their worship practices.

### EXPERIENCES THAT LED TO THIS TEXTBOOK

I have been teaching a foundational worship course for almost twenty-three years now, once or twice a year. I have the greatest respect for worship textbooks already published. James F. White's *Introduction to Christian Worship*<sup>2</sup> is comprehensive in its exploration of Christian liturgy, with strong historical research and encyclopedic knowledge of the classical Western worship traditions. Susan White's *Foundations of Christian Worship* is particularly articulate and contemporary in its theology.<sup>3</sup> Both address many important issues in liturgical studies. *Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship* by Franklin M. Segler, revised by Randall Bradley, is helpful in its practical advice about worship and its provision of primary source materials.<sup>4</sup> I have used one of these three textbooks each time I taught the course, together with *African American Christian Worship* by Melva Costen<sup>5</sup> (a concise yet informative exploration of African American traditions with excellent theological insights applicable to all traditions) or *Diverse Worship* by Pedrito Maynard-Reid<sup>6</sup> (a helpful exploration of the role of culture in worship, especially in African American, Caribbean, and Hispanic traditions). I have also assigned articles from the Korean and Hispanic traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the great value of all these resources, I have undertaken this project first of all because my teaching situation has meant that I am always struggling to find readings adequate to the great diversity of denominational and cultural backgrounds of my students. There are two options for the required worship class: United Methodist Worship, which a colleague teaches, and Christian Public Worship, which I teach. Students who are not United Methodist are a large percentage of the students in Christian Public Worship. There are members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Korean Methodist Church, and other Methodist traditions, as well as my own denomination, the United Church of Christ; other students are Baptist, Pentecostal, or Presbyterian. Almost always my classes represent a wonderful array of denominational, national, and cultural backgrounds. I cannot explore all these traditions in as much detail as I would like, and since it is a United Methodist seminary I emphasize that tradition more than

others. Still, it is important to me to teach in a way that is relevant and applicable to all the students in my class, which means stretching my understanding of theology and practice.

Given this experience, a primary goal of this book is to honor the diversity of Christian communities and their worship. As I have reflected over the years on teaching in a diverse environment, I have come to see that liturgical studies, a relatively new area of theological study, can be limited in its perspective. The liturgical renewal movement inspired by the work of Vatican II sits at the very center of the field, and it has brought many gifts to the churches that have embraced it. What a refreshing wind was blowing in the 1960s to encourage churches of many backgrounds to promote active participation of the laity and to celebrate sacraments with more energy and care as “vivid signs of the Spirit”!<sup>8</sup> How helpful the Roman Lectionary and its Protestant adaptations have been in ensuring the churches would read and reflect on a rich treasury of Scripture, centered on the journey of Jesus from birth to death to resurrection! How wise it was to bring Word and Sacrament into better balance, so that preaching and the sacraments served together as the heart of Christian worship! The liturgical renewal movement has made a significant improvement in the worshipping life of countless churches around the world. Yet the very norm of fostering the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful in worship, which is central to this movement, presses us toward a deeper embrace of cultural diversity in worship.

Traditions of continental Europe and the British Isles sometimes function in the field of liturgical studies as the norm and measure of Christian worship. Christians worshipping within the United States, much less in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, may not recognize the best of their traditions represented adequately (if at all) in the writings of liturgical scholars. This is not as simple as talking about Lenten processions in the Philippines or vivid storytelling in African American sermons, or even paying more attention to the social contexts in which the world’s people live. It is a paradigm shift (parallel to the postcolonial movement in Christian theology) that envisions diverse Christian communities standing side by side as people who worship God, without privileging one group over the other, like the great multitude envisioned in Revelation 7:9 “that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands,” crying out in a loud voice and saying, “Salvation belongs

to our God!” The European and White North American measure of what is adequate liturgy must be decentered, so that Christians of many backgrounds can learn from one another and the Spirit how to worship and to honor one another more deeply and fully.<sup>9</sup> While this will be fully possible only as more liturgical scholars from a broader range of backgrounds take part in liturgical studies, I hope in this book to contribute in a small way to this shift toward a global understanding of the church and its worship.

The *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture*, growing out of an international study group of the Lutheran World Federation at their meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996, provides a framework that can contribute to this shift in paradigm:

Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways. First, it is *transcultural*, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture. Second, it is *contextual*, varying according to the local situation (both nature and culture). Third, it is *counter-cultural*, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture. Fourth, it is *cross-cultural*, making possible sharing between different local cultures.<sup>10</sup>

Two hundred years after the missionary movement toward world evangelism began, it is easy to identify how missionaries sometimes treated their contextual practices of dress, language, music, and worship as if they were transcultural, required for everyone everywhere. It is not as easy as it might seem for members of dominant groups to discern how a White Eurocentric norm continues to operate, assuming what is only contextual is transcultural. James W. Perkinson writes in *White Theology* that White supremacy tends to operate as “the hidden ground from which ‘talk’ takes off, in modern Eurocentric evaluations of reality and divinity. . . . We can mystify ourselves, and others into imagining that white supremacy is ‘present’ and potent only when explicitly identified as such.”<sup>11</sup> The task today is to discern how, in cross-cultural solidarity, to respect contextualized worship practices of Christians throughout the world, while at the same time seeking the transcultural presence of the living God and doing the countercultural work of seeking justice and peace in our own context.

A second main concern I bring to this book is for the practices of worship. I was drawn to the study of worship by my ten years as full-time pastor in Illinois and Wisconsin. (I also served as interim and supply pastor in a number of churches while I was working on my

ThD degree). I had wonderful training about the theology, spirit, and purpose of worship at Chicago Theological Seminary by Christian education professor Ross Snyder, preaching professor Charles Bayer, and others, but I'm not sure that any professor even mentioned the word "funeral." It fell to retired pastor Warner Siebert, who was a member of the first church I served as solo pastor, to guide me in shaping my first funeral. His advice served me well, but finding myself in this situation caused me to think about how my seminary education could have been more helpful. I have a passion for the practical, a desire to prepare students to lead worship with care, integrating theological reflection with pastoral sensitivity, energy, and liturgical creativity, in a way that is appropriate to their contexts. Indeed, given the diversity of students I teach, it would not be appropriate to prescribe just one correct practice of any aspect of worship; it is necessary to foster the ability to integrate theology and practice in planning and leading worship. Thus I have desired in my classes and in this book to give more attention to the practice of worship than is often the case.

A third central concern I bring to this book motivates virtually every liturgical scholar: the desire to contribute to local church vitality and faithful Christian practice. Worship is at the center of the church's life and a life-changing encounter with God. Of course God takes no delight in our solemn assemblies (Amos 5:21–24) unless they lead to the work of justice, compassion, and holiness to which God calls the church in the world. Yet worship shapes Christian community and identity and draws the congregation into the story of God's love and care for the world. Spirit-filled worship empowers the church to be the church. Worship, then, is a key practice worthy of all the best reflection, practice, and openness to the Spirit the church and its leaders can muster.

Worship supports local church vitality when leaders seek to make worship respectful and meaningful to all who gather, whatever their gender or sexual orientation, whatever their age or ability, whatever their ethnic or national background. Respect is shown through words that do not demean or exclude and through varied means of participation, through seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching, and through listening and speaking, moving and remaining silent, singing and clapping. The spirit of a congregation who participates actively in worship, open to the Spirit of God, attracts new members and nurtures longtime members in ways deeper than style or musical taste. Worship is the work of the *laos*, the whole people of God. The title of this book,

*Worship for the Whole People of God*, points to this central truth: the goal of those who plan and lead worship should be to engage the full, wholehearted participation of the whole congregation.<sup>12</sup>

A final concern of mine—which may seem paradoxical given what I have already said—is to speak passionately and forthrightly, since worship is so important in the life and renewal of the churches. I hope that when I advocate certain practices strongly (for example, frequent celebration of Communion or openness toward gay and lesbian Christians) I won't seem to be demanding a uniformity that doesn't respect difference, but engaging conversations I find very important, while respecting people with other viewpoints and practices. I hope that this volume may serve (among other things) as a textbook on Christian worship, yet I want to avoid sounding distant and encyclopedic, but to communicate the excitement and value of worship well done, to the glory of God!

### MY OWN LOCATION AND STORY

Perhaps my viewpoints will seem more understandable if I share something of my own background and life story. My ancestors, primarily English and Scottish, as well as Cherokee, have had roots in the United States since at least the seventeenth century. In recent generations, on my father's side were Methodist and Pentecostal Christians, and on my mother's side, mostly Baptist Christians; both were from Tennessee and deeply influenced by evangelical/Frontier Christianity, as I am. As for church membership, I was Methodist for sixteen years from my birth in 1947, then Presbyterian for ten years. In early 1974 I joined the United Church of Christ, and later that year I was ordained in that denomination, where I have continued since. I also served on the Disciples of Christ committee that produced the *Chalice Hymnal*. My spouse, Ovaldo Buntin, is an Episcopalian from St. Croix, Virgin Islands, and I worship with him at his church several times a year. And of course, I am so located among the United Methodists at my seminary that once, when singer Jim Strathdee asked a group who was *not* United Methodist, someone had to remind me to raise my hand.

I have been educated in Presbyterian, UCC, Roman Catholic, and United Methodist institutions. These were excellent schools, each in its own way, but I can count on my fingers the number of assigned readings written by a woman or a person of color. I have done much

reading beyond this and worshiped in diverse contexts, yet I realize that my worldview is subconsciously shaped by the canon of literature (and other life experiences) to regard the Euro-Anglo-White traditions of worship as the “real” tradition of worship, with others being variations of lesser import. I suspect that many of us studying and teaching liturgy today have similar experiences, though few in the North American Academy of Liturgy, our scholarly guild, are as deeply rooted in evangelical traditions as I am. I hope that the rising generations of liturgical scholars will be able to imagine the vast landscape of Christian worship more fully and clearly than I do. What I see is only a glimpse.

I am thankful that I have been able to sojourn and worship with Christians from so many backgrounds. These times of conversing and worshipping together have changed me and freed me to praise the living God more deeply and fully.

### ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The first chapters of the book lay the foundation for our consideration of Christian worship by exploring the theology of worship in chapter 1 and the understanding of worship as the participation of the whole people of God in chapter 2. Chapter 3 explores the diversity of Christian worship traditions.

The practical considerations of preparing services of Christian worship follow in the next five chapters. Chapter 4 considers the nature and tasks of planning and leading worship, as well as the order in which worship proceeds. Chapter 5 explores the arts of worship. Chapter 6 treats the shaping of vivid words for worship, followed in chapter 7 by consideration of various forms of prayer in worship, from the greeting to the benediction. Chapter 8 treats the closely related topics of Scripture and the church year in preaching and worship.

The next group of chapters considers the sacraments and rites of the church. Chapter 9 explores the understanding of sacramentality and sacramental living. Chapter 10 addresses baptism and the related rites of baptismal affirmation, ordination, and commissioning. This is followed by reflection on the theology and practice of the Eucharist in chapter 11. Chapter 12 considers the theology and practice of conducting marriages and services of death and resurrection. Chapter 13 explores healing and reconciliation in Christian worship, oft-neglected areas of study.

The final chapter considers some recent developments in worship in the United States and then articulates for further thought some basic norms for Christian worship that might apply across our many traditions.

I hope to add a section to my Web site, [www.ruthduckhymnist.net](http://www.ruthduckhymnist.net), with resources to support the use of this book, including discussion questions and learning activities.

## CONCLUSION

Psalm 84:1, 4 describes the gift of dwelling in God's presence and singing God's praise: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! . . . Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise." I count it a blessing to spend my life in studying, teaching, and leading Christian worship, as well as writing hymns and prayers for congregational worship. To study and teach about liturgy is also an awesome thing, because this work centers on the unimaginable love, creativity, dynamism, and holiness of God at work in the church, the body of Christ. May the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit shine through on every page, to the glory of the triune God!